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Laurent Stern's *Interpretive Reasoning*

Mary Wiseman

Introduction

Laurent Stern casts his net wide in this careful and probing analysis of a rational activity that we begin to practice in kindergarten. He does not address the question of whether interpretive reasoning is different in kind from reasoning that is deductive, inductive, practical, or moral, however, because his interest lies not in mapping the geography of our kinds of rational activity but in the formulation and justification of the principles we use in making interpretations, whose objects are, he claims, actions and speech acts. This means that when we interpret laws, texts, works of art, and other human productions, we are construing them in terms of the activities that produced them. The product is the record of the act of producing it. It is a record of the intention with which legislators, writers, or artists act, so long, that is, that they were successful in realizing their intentions. We want to know what they did, why, how, and with what materials. We interpret, Stern claims, only when we do not understand what another said or did; our goal in interpreting is to make sense of the words or deeds. There is no single answer to the question of when interpretation is called for just because some people set the bar for an adequate understanding higher than others, and some circumstances require a deeper understanding of what was said or done than others do. Even so, there are principles in play when we do interpret, and it is these that Stern sets out to capture.

I am going to look at three issues that might at first seem peripheral to Stern's central enterprise. The first looks at the difference between speaking with an individual voice and letting one's interpretations be influenced by what Stern calls "private conditions." Here he makes a significant contribution to the literature on interpretation. The second looks at his characterization of the conditions under which we must interpret what another says or does; this raises the matter of the points of view from which an interpreter can regard what was said or done, her own or that of the speaker or agent or of any rational person. Here I find what Stern says to be curiously incomplete. The third asks the difference between interpreting what people say and do and interpreting works of art. I suspect that art interpretations, like Kant's aesthetic judgments, are pure in a way that their practical cousins are not and that a study of how we make them is more central to the enterprise of mapping our interpretive principles than Stern might allow.

Interpretive Reasoning is for the most part an account of the ways *speakers* go wrong when what they say jars with the facts, and it calls them to account when they are blameworthy for being wrong, that is, when they are self-deceived and "should have known better." It also calls *interpreters* to account when, in the name of being tolerant of interpretations incompatible with their own, they are insincere or hypocritical, both modes of lying. Here Stern addresses the moral

dimension of practical interpretation, and this address is one of the gems of the book. He is suspicious of interpreters, citing again and again circumstances in which an interpreter defends her interpretation by citing the Restrictive Principle "*Only reasonable persons* who are familiar with the circumstances understand what is at issue the way I do," (10) when what she would really like to cite or what she really means is the Universalizability Principle, "*Every reasonable person* who is familiar with the circumstances understands what is at issue the way I do."(9) Such insincerity is rife in the universe of discourse as Stern parses it, which is itself rife with interpretation.

Before we enter a land where there may be lies, self-deception, insincerity, and hypocrisy, let us ask of those who speak and act, "Who is speaking or who is acting?"

1. Private Conditions and Individual Voices

"We must have a standard of correctness for our interpretations if we wish to avoid *the major pitfall of interpreting*: the projections of our own beliefs, desires, and understanding of what is at issue onto the object of interpretation."(203) (Emphasis added.) Such projections imperil all our efforts to understand others, including words and actions we think we understand and do not need to interpret. The pitfall consists in subjecting the object under interpretation to conditions private to the interpreter, reducing it to a screen for the projection of her own beliefs and desires. We are here at the nub of a matter dear to Stern: the difference between not allowing oneself to be influenced by such private conditions, on the one hand, and speaking with one's own voice, on the other. He says "No" to private conditions and "Yes" to individual voices. One difference between the two appears in the catalogue of conditions an interpretation has to satisfy in order to justify its interpreter in *demanding* agreement from everyone else. Speaking with an individual voice is not among them, whereas not structuring the object to be interpreted in line with the configuration of the interpreter's private mental attitudes is. A lot of weight is put on the notion of the private: it is true, though not definitive, of a mental attitude or event's being private that its subject cannot reasonably expect other reasonable people to share it.

The conditions whose satisfaction allows an interpreter to demand agreement fall first of all on the *interpreter*. They are three: the interpreter must not project herself onto the *interpretandum*, must make the interpretation consistent with the facts; and must choose the best available interpretation of those facts. My voice is my own when it has grown out of the experiences of my life and when it sounds only what I have myself accepted, not what I have merely borrowed from another person or group. The kinds of consensus most apt to skew an interpretation are those formed within a group defined by its special interests, feminist or Marxist say, or by its interpreter's commitment to a political party or philosophical theory.

The importance of having an individual voice comes to the fore in discussion of the interpretation of works of art and philosophy, distinguished by Stern from law, science, and

religion in that interpretations in the latter fields are application-driven, while those in art and philosophy are principle-driven. Stern might seem to ignore this distinction when, having said that understanding is the goal of interpreting, he goes on to say that "Our understanding of what others have said and done is guided by its application to a given purpose. Interpretations are application-driven." (68) I take it that here Stern means that the interpreter assumes the purposefulness of the words or deeds he is trying to make sense of and that his interpretation has to fit that purpose. There is a narrower sense of "application" in which the sense that an application-driven interpretation makes of its object has to be such that the law, scientific hypothesis, or religious law to be interpreted can be applied to a particular case. The need to apply the law or hypothesis is usually what called for the interpretation in the first place. Gone is the luxury of entertaining various interpretations to see what can be made of the work under interpretation, a strategy helpful in exploring and exploiting the depths of works of art and philosophy.

The individual voice comes to the fore in art and philosophy because the job of the art critic and the philosopher is precisely to give voice not only to what they have accepted as their own, but also, in the best case, to what is new. Many people can say the same thing with their own voices, but the creative critic and philosopher, like the creative artist and scientist, see and say something that no one else has seen or said. Where is interpreting here? The critic interprets the artwork. In Stern's words, this is to bestow meaning on it. The philosopher solves a problem by making a different sense of it from has already been made by interpreting it in a different way. The *individuality* of the individual voice is what stands out: it says what no one has yet said. There are innovators in law, science, and religion as well, but the practice of the three disciplines consists in large part of applying their laws, whereas the practices of criticism and philosophy consist in canvassing possible ways of seeing and framing their objects rather than in finding a fit between them and theories of criticism or philosophy.

Interpreting with one's own voice is not, however, a necessary condition for making a good interpretation. Suppose someone comes up with an interpretive hypothesis about something said that fits the facts, which are facts about the speaker's state of mind (he is sincere and not self-deceived) and the world, and I judge the hypothesis to be trustworthy. Suppose further that I judge it to be free of the projection of its framer's beliefs and desires and to be the best available. I can accept it as mine even though it is not original with me. And if I do accept it, we can say that it is the interpretation I *would* have made had I known everything about the interpreted object that its interpreter did and had he not gotten there first. I have not borrowed the *voice* of the other; I have borrowed *what he said*. If originality is all that is foregone in borrowing another's interpretation, then using a ready-made interpretation does no injustice to the interpreter or the *interpretandum* so long as what was borrowed satisfies the three conditions.

It is not always permissible to borrow interpretations, however. Consider the case of a doctrinaire feminist who

tends to see much of what is said and done in terms of the patriarchal oppression of women and whose interpretations are made from the point of view of radical feminism. We are inclined to say that her voice is not her own but feminism's. Feminist interpretations are at risk of blanketing the objects to be interpreted with beliefs, desires, and understandings that are private (belong uniquely) to the movement and of *anchoring* the interpretations to a *simulacrum* of the object under interpretation. If one accepts the beliefs and desires to which feminism gives rise *just because* she is sympathetic to feminism's goals and not because she has worked them out for herself, we do not say that she is using her own voice to say what feminism says. We say instead that she is speaking with feminism's voice. Suppose, for example, one interprets the painting of a female nude as the object of male desire not because one has found evidence for this through careful study of the painting but because one assumes that since some paintings of female nudes are objects for the male gaze, all must be, men being what they are. Such an interpretation is not justified because she has obscured the object with an overlay of feminist dicta.

One can be a feminist and make feminist interpretations in her own voice, however. This would be someone who works through the feminist theory-generated propositions that guide the beliefs and desires of its adherents and assesses the evidence for them. If, then, she judges that certain of the propositions are true of an object to be interpreted and uses them in making the interpretation, she is speaking with her own and not with feminism's voice. Can an individual be sure that her sympathy with feminism's goals has not influenced her assessments of items in the world to which the theory applies? Can she be sure that in her interpretations she is not projecting her feminist beliefs onto what she is interpreting, rather than finding something internal to the words or works that fits with feminist beliefs? Kant, for one, has said no.

This is a danger faced by anyone who believes anything: that you deceive yourself into thinking you are not projecting onto what is to be interpreted something that is merely external to it, when in truth you are projecting onto it something that could not be discovered just through scrutiny of the word or deed in need of interpretation. There is nothing for this, and here I think of Kant's speaking to the difficulty of knowing whether you are performing an act out of duty or interest: you cannot know for sure because no matter how deep down into yourself you look, there is always the chance that you will come upon the dear self with all its interests. What Stern calls *private conditions* are the beliefs and desires that contribute to an individual's being who she is and inflect her understanding of what is at issue in the matter under interpretation. The beliefs might be well-evidenced and shared by many, as might the desires, but it is the configuration of the desires together with the individual's history that links them uniquely to the individual. Simply to project them onto the object under interpretation is to obscure the object; better, it is to obscure its meaning. We need not here worry the issue of the distinction between what speeches and actions *do* mean and what they *could* mean because both depend on what is, in some sense, "there" in the words or the actions. And we can say that what is there is that for which a case can be made,

where the best case yields the best interpretation. Stern is unwavering in his claim that interpretation is necessary only when one does not understand something said or done (where the something said can be a theory and the something done a work of art). His theory shares a problem that dogs any theory of knowledge or of interpretation, namely, that of knowing enough about what is not yet known or interpreted to be able to start on the way to knowing or interpreting it. But this only means that there might be some actions or speech-acts that an interpreter can never understand.

Individual voices are to be distinguished from borrowed or group voices, which merely mouth what another individual or group says. When someone speaks with her own voice, she need not be saying what no one else says. She need only be saying what comes from premises and principles that she has worked through and to which she has committed herself, that is, from the range of mental activities and attitudes that constitute her mental world. One can be engaged in interpretive *reasoning* only if her voice is her own and not her neighbor's or her groups. Let the interpreter speak in her own voice and not a borrowed one, and let the object of her interpretation be itself and not a mere projection of her memories and desires, beliefs and doubts, longings and dreams. Then the object of interpretation will have been allowed to be itself, the interpreter will have expressed herself in the making of it, and in Bishop Butler's words "each thing will have been shown to be what it is and not another thing."

2. When Words Don't Convey

One focus of the book is the realm of motives, causes, reasons, and intentions that come forward when we talk about speakers and listeners. It is not, that is to say, only about what speakers say or about grammatically well-formed segments of language in general but about speech-acts, their targeted listeners, and the contexts in which the words are uttered. Early on Stern observes that interpretation of others' words is called for only when a listener finds what another says to conflict with the facts as she, the listener, knows them. The interpreter's job then is two-fold: one, to find out what would have to be the case for what was said to make sense; two, to discover how the speaker was wrong so that the interpreter can figure out how to take what was said. The possibilities are many. The speaker might have made a mistake in one of the myriad ways one can get things wrong: she was blind to the facts or she misperceived or misjudged them because she was preoccupied or had a hidden agenda, and so on. She might well have known what the facts were but simply lied about them. She might have been wrong about the facts in a deep-seated way that was not to be corrected by having her error pointed out to her. That is to say, she might have been self-deceived. Here, then, are three ways a speaker can end up saying something that is not obvious to her listener: by making an easily corrected mistake, by knowingly lying to the listener, or by unknowingly lying to herself. Where does interpreting come in? The listener did not understand what was said because it does not fit with what she accepts as the relevant facts.

As Stern lays it out, what is to be interpreted is not the

meaning of the utterance but its motive (a lie) or its cause (the speaker's error or self-deception). But surely these are not the only kinds of cases in which a listener does not understand what is said. An interpretation can be complicated by taking into consideration, as sometimes the listener must, the points of view of speaker and listener, the relevant knowledge of each, and the context of the speech. Stern himself introduced the first complication when he said that the goal of interpretation is to come to understand what another said "when we cannot grasp immediately what was said [or done]. The interpreter cannot grasp it, because from his viewpoint there is a gap between what was said and his understanding of what was said." (201-202) Notice that the interpreter's failure is to grasp what was said *from his viewpoint*. This leaves open the possibility that he might grasp it if he were to look at it from the speaker's point of view.

Now as early as kindergarten, Stern says, the child learns that when he is trying to understand others there are two possibilities. One is that "if he were in their place in the current situation, he would say what they have said—in this case he interprets their words in the light of what he accepts as facts, and he accepts as facts what their words propose." (Emphasis added.) The other possibility is that he would not say what they said because he does not accept as facts what their words propose. (7) Looking at what was said from the speaker's point of view is the same as the interpreter's putting himself in the speaker's place, and this is what, Stern implies, we naturally do in trying to understand another. It is a plausible reconstruction of what we do.

Stern leaves it open as to whether it is *as oneself* that one is to put oneself in the other's place and adopt his viewpoint or *as the speaker*. Even when speaker and interpreter are equally knowledgeable and agree on the facts of the matter under interpretation, it makes a difference which persona the interpreter adopts when he assumes the place of the speaker. Often enough we find ourselves thinking that if we were in the circumstances of the one whose words we are interpreting, we certainly would not say what the speaker said. Were we, however, to put ourselves in the place of the speaker, *as the speaker* and not as ourselves, we might well say what he said. Suppose that *as ourselves* we would not say what the speaker said, but *as the speaker*, we would. Suppose further that we think if Susan and Mary and Harvey imagined they were in the speaker's place *as themselves*, they too would not say what the speaker said. The longer the list of people we imagine in the speaker's place who would not say what the speaker did, the shakier becomes our understanding of what the speaker said and the less sense it seems to make. What if the condition for understanding were: no interpretation is needed of a speaker's words if they are "what *anyone* would say were he in the speaker's place" rather than "what *the interpreter* would say."

Back to the question of when interpretation is called for. Having said that it is when there is a gap between what was said and the interpreter's understanding of what was said, Stern continues "guided by common sense, [the interpreter] attributes reasons to the speaker's or agent's words or deeds." (202) Common sense is needed because interpretation is an

art, not a science. This is true, but quite often when a person does not understand what another has said, it is because he does not know enough. Knowledge is needed as well as common sense. Suppose the speaker is a connoisseur of wines, and his listener is not. When, then, the speaker describes a wine as having structure and a musky flavor with a hint of blackberry, the listener will not understand him. He needs an interpretation, but it does not have to be one that he has made. Were the listener to adopt the viewpoint of the connoisseur, he would be in a position to take Stern's test for understanding another's words: we can be said to understand what the other said when it is what we would say were we in his place. But knowing little about wine, the listener cannot adopt the point of view of the expert, and he cannot know what he would say were he in the wine expert's place. Sometimes, then, when one does not understand another's words, it is because the listener is ignorant, not because the speaker is mistaken, lying, or self-deceived.

The test of understanding another's words is characterized by Stern in a second way: "All speakers and agents want us to understand their words and deeds *as they wish we should understand them.*" (202) (Emphasis added.) This is different from their wanting us to understand their words and deeds as they *intend* us to, which is the same as saying, simply, they want us to understand the point of what they say or do. I might be making too much of the word "wish," but it lets me describe a case in which the words uttered are not what need interpreting. Suppose the speaker is a man trying to seduce a woman and he says something perfectly ordinary in a tone of voice and with expressive gestures that makes it seem as though he is sharing some intimacy with her. Now if she understands what he says as he wishes her to, she will mistakenly think he is singling her out to be privy to something he would not share with just anyone. He is not, however. He is trying to gain her confidence so that he can have his way with her. She will have misinterpreted his speech-act, which consists in more than his uttering commonplaces.

If, however, she finds the words discrepant with his intimate and conspiratorial gestures and voice, she will find a gap between what he says and does, on the one hand, and her understanding of the words and their accompanying behavior, on the other. Here common sense, guiding her to the reasons for the speaker's words and behavior, will enable her correctly to interpret them. Among the ways a speaker can go wrong, then, is by deliberately misleading his audience through a failure of fit not between words and facts, but between words and accompanying behavior. The examples of the wine expert and the seducer show two things. First, sometimes when we cannot immediately grasp what was said, it is because we do not know enough. We cannot grasp it all unless we become more or less as knowledgeable as the speaker. Second, sometimes it is not the words themselves that are not understood, but the intentions with which they are uttered.

More fully to draw out the complexity of interpretive reasoning and to accommodate point of view, degree and kind of knowledge, and distorting intentions, let us look again at Stern's characterization of the situation in which a listener

understands what was said to him if (and only if) it is what he would say if he were in the speaker's place in the current situation. Since understanding is the goal of interpretation, any test of the understanding made possible by an interpretation is at the same time a test of the soundness of the interpretation. We ask ourselves if we would accept this condition on an interpretation: an interpretation of something said is justified just in case it is what *anyone* suitably qualified would say were he in the speaker's place, where spelling out what it is to be "suitably qualified" will involve both general specifications and those particular to the *interpretandum*. Notice that putting "anyone" in place of "the interpreter" protects the interpretation from the interpreter's projection onto it of the configuration of his own mental attitudes, which Stern is at pains to avoid.

3. Works of Art and Words of Others

The smoothness and elegance of Stern's theory of interpretive reasoning requires that the kind of reasoning a listener uses in interpreting another's words be the same as the reasoning he uses in interpreting works of art. He says that the proper understanding of an artwork includes the appreciation of it, but that by itself does not make interpreting art different from interpreting everyday speech and actions. To appreciate a work is to value it for how it engages us and for what it lets us see about the world and ourselves. A reliable sign that we have understood a work, then, is our being touched, even changed, by it. This is a sufficient, albeit not a necessary, sign of having understood the work. One difference between works of art and the words of others is that most artworks seem not to be grasped immediately, as Stern says most speech is. He has been at pains to give criteria for understanding what another said, and we want to see if they apply to works of art.

Let us go back to the kindergarten in which Stern began *Interpretive Reasoning*. I quote in full: "In kindergarten the novice has learned to distinguish between two possibilities when understanding others. (1) If he were in their place in the current situation, he would say what they have said. In this case he interprets their words in the light of what he accepts as facts, and he accepts as facts what their words propose. (2) If he were in their place in the current situation, he would not say what they have said. In this case he also interprets their words in the light of what he accepts as facts, but he does not accept as facts what is proposed by their words." (7) Counterpart to a speaker's *words* is the painting's colors, lines, and shapes. What the painted colors, lines, and shapes *propose* is that they represent, variously, teeth and a mouth, an eye, hair, a dress, a curtain, an arm, a leg. The *facts* are what the colored patches propose, namely, that on the canvas of Willem de Kooning's 1953 *Woman* is a picture of a woman.

We have gone one step beyond accepting that the paint patches composed teeth and lips, an eye and the rest. Just as words have meanings and obey rules of formation to compose sentences, so patches of paint represent items in the world like eyes, legs, dresses that can be ordered so as to compose a picture of a woman. Following Stern, de Kooning's viewer

performs an experiment in imagination: she imagines that she is in de Kooning's place and asks herself what de Kooning has painted. Since the voices of good artists are their own, we do not ask whether the viewer should put herself in de Kooning's place as herself or as the artist. What the artist did is idiosyncratic to him; we have no interest in what the viewer would have done had she stood, brush in hand, in front of his canvas. We ask the viewer to imagine that she is de Kooning and to ask if she intended the colored shapes and lines she put on the canvas represent a woman. Well, yes. It is clear enough that it is a woman. Remember, what we want to know is whether the viewer understands the painting, and we have said, following Stern on interpreting in general, that she does if, *were she in his place*, she would have done as he did. That is, given the assignment de Kooning set himself, which she must figure out by scrutiny of the painting, would the viewer have painted *this* woman. Would she have laid the paint as de Kooning did, in strokes broad, quick, and jagged. Would she have repeated teeth and eye on the woman's chest? Would she have the woman grimace so? I think the nature of creativity and of the individual voice is such that a viewer's asking herself what she would have done had she been in the artist's place allows only "I have no idea." Here is where interpreting what other people do and say in the ordinary course of things and interpreting what artists and philosophers do and say in the practice of art and philosophy part ways.

Better than asking the viewer to imagine herself in de Kooning's place is to ask what intentions the painting seems to her to fulfill and whether they are such that she can imagine anyone (anyone at all?) having them. The viewer has to make a case for the sets of intentions the painting seems to her to fulfill. Stern would say that the set for which the best case can be made is the best interpretation of the work. Given different evaluative criteria, different interpretations might count as the best. Stern should be able to accept this since his account of interpretive reasoning does not shy away from evaluation, as it does not shy away from articulating rules for the moral conduct of the activity of interpreting.

The possibility of gaps between what an artwork says and what the viewer hears, between what the painter paints and what the viewer would paint were she in his place (as the creator of that work, not as herself) can at times keep us from seeing what it is that calls for interpretation. Because of this, the matter of determining the conditions under which art interpretations are necessary and the conditions they must satisfy to be justified is more complex than might at first appear. And the borders between interpretive reasoning and understanding, between understanding and appreciating, between appreciating and engaging are more porous than Stern's characterizations allow. This is so for interpreting the words of others as well as works of art, but the toll it takes on interpreting works of art and philosophy is greater than its toll on ordinary words and actions. Interpretive reasoning is like dancing in that it engages the whole person. Throughout this book, whose gamut runs from the singularity of the individual voice to the universality of what any rational man and woman would understand an agent to be doing or saying in given circumstances, Laurent Stern is wholly engaged in this enterprise in which he asks when we should and when we

must intrude on (interpret) the acts of others in order for us properly to engage them. The reader stands only to gain when she agrees to dance with him.

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