

Theory of Knowledge Essay

Prompt #5: How can we distinguish between good and bad interpretations? Discuss with reference to the arts and one other area of knowledge.

William Shakespeare, an English playwright, wrote in his tragedy *Hamlet*, “There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.” Any multitude of things being classified as good or bad can only exist through the differentiation between the two ideas. Often, goodness is associated with feelings, outcomes, or thoughts of positivity, while badness acts as its opposite in relation to negativity. However, neither label can ever be fixed to anything which can be perceived, so long as perspective persists. In Shakespeare’s quote, he explains this reality of the perspective, in implying that nothing in existence is inherently anything, until the experiences which are unique to an individual ascribe meaning towards what is bad or good. Through the many ways to define an interpretation within different contexts such as the arts and human sciences, the methods by which individuals can differentiate between a good or a bad interpretation considers references to the self, to its credibility, and to the social and cultural usefulness of that interpretation.

At its core, the arts facilitate a mode of evaluation that always invokes the personal aspect of interpreting something, as seen through the watching of TV shows. Visual art through film and television often include storylines with controversial topics, which raise the issue of whether an expert or critic of the topic delivers the good, or better interpretation of the media compared to that of the artist themselves or the art’s intended audience. An example of this dilemma can be seen through the popular Netflix show called *13 Reasons Why*, a show surrounding a teenage girl who struggles with depression and bullying and ultimately takes her own life. Upon its release in 2017,

the show sent the internet, news outlets, and a large portion of American society into a frenzy (Serani). Many viewers were divided with their interpretation of this media, with some finding the events of the show to be relatable, applauding it for demystifying the taboo topic of mental illness. Meanwhile, many credible psychologists interpreted the show as dangerous to its impressionable viewers, as the show's own interpretation of suicide glamorized it. This interconnection between the interpretations of the show's content, and how the scriptwriters interpreted teen depression, are all valuable to the conversation of good and bad interpretations. All things considered, the goodness of an interpretation regarding this visual art is relative to the personal connection a viewer builds towards it, which can prove uplifting for its representation of their feelings, and helpful in bringing awareness to individuals.

Similarly, visual media in the form of traditional art such as sculptures can highlight the methods of differentiation between good and bad interpretations. "Fountain" is a readymade sculpture made in 1917 by Marcel Duchamp that consists of a porcelain urinal, signed "R. Mutt." Duchamp had submitted the sculpture to an exhibition in New York for the Society of Independent Artists, yet the members of the society deemed the sculpture "not art" (Camfield 65). Pieces of art, while not strictly made with the opinion of art critics in mind, often gain or lose much of their value depending on the interpretation of said critics. Since this controversy hinges mostly on the criterion of interpretation credibility, when questioning the usefulness of readymade art and other non-traditional art forms to society, therein arises a possible cultural expansion on what can be considered good art, bad art, or art at all. Although Duchamp's readymade urinal has no practical use as a tool, it serves the greater purpose of highlighting the vagueness of the term 'art.' It is reasonable that experienced art critics of the time believed that Duchamp's piece was bad within their art world, considering Western culture had a limited toleration for the avant-garde.

Ultimately, the ambiguity of art comes from personal connection, giving power to individual opinion both in its creation and interpretation.

However, personal connection aside, perhaps the most influential criterion in determining a good or bad interpretation comes from the experts on a situation, given the consequences of certain art being put out into the world. In reference to the Netflix show “13 Reasons Why,” a study published in *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* attributed it to a 28.9% increase in suicide rates among 10 to 17 year-olds in the U.S. following the show's release (Bridge et al. 5). This upward trend of suicide could undoubtedly affirm the expert interpretation of distaste towards the show to be good and informed, however, other unmeasured societal factors may have contributed to the trend. Therefore, the interpretations of different social groups is by no means invalid, revealing the different ways to determine good and bad interpretations surrounding the art with important implications at stake. By judging art, a transformation of the individual's own differentiation between good and bad is catalyzed.

Continuing this investigation on differing interpretations, the many disciplines within the human sciences each carry a dichotomy of varied interpretations that allow for further exploration. Individual input greatly influences the acquisition of knowledge within any human science discipline, that while confounding in certain disciplines, offers necessary insight into the behavioral patterns of societies and how they contrast between good and bad interpretations. This can be observed within economics and political science, taking the Cold War for example, where tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States ultimately became a battle between communism and capitalism with international socio-political effects. Propaganda coming from both sides directed against each other led to societal interpretations of each economic system that were often led by bias (“The Cold War”). The differences between each economic system matters

not in regard to distinguishing between good and bad interpretations, but rather the impact of social phenomena in forming interpretations. The diffusion of knowledge during international conflict can lead to widespread confusion and fear of the unknown, generating very rigid good or bad interpretations of the situation. In this scenario, propaganda and social unrest led to misinformed, negative, and bad interpretations of the war itself and the economic systems in question. In order to distinguish between interpretations, social responses and access to knowledge—or lack thereof—act as markers of a good or bad interpretation while revealing influences of groupthink.

Furthermore, the anthropological dissemination of religion and its culture allows for identifiable differences between good and bad interpretations. Many interpretations can spawn from the same religious practice or tradition, such as the reinterpretation of the pagan winter solstice as the Christian holiday, Christmas. The generally unacknowledged origins of Christmas contain hand-picked elements from the Yule celebration, creating much debate on the authenticity of Christmas (Roll 56). This anthropologically focused discussion showcases how people may interpret religion differently depending on their preconceptions and the knowledge they possess. While adjustments and changes to an original interpretation may serve to deem the new one inauthentic and thus bad, the personal connections people form towards recycled knowledge allows for new interpretations that are valid in their own right. Religion, like other components of anthropology, rely on the feelings which individuals assign it. If a certain social group finds their interpretation of knowledge to be useful for their community, it can therefore be a good interpretation. Overall, there is a cultural necessity for distinguishing between interpretations, as societies rely on commonalities and distinction in order to build identity.

While personal influences can be useful in determining the goodness or badness of an interpretation, there is also benefit in the no observer effect, where an interpretation is given its

value with limited bias. In Deb Roy's "The Speechome Project," an experiment done to evaluate the development of language in children, raw data was deemed useless unless the contexts in which speech was spoken in were clarified and observer effect was minimized (Roy 935). This implies that without specificity and unbiased data, a proper interpretation of the results could not be determined, creating bad interpretations. Certain knowledge derived from investigations in the human sciences have the possibility of being skewed by confounding variables, yet this does not invalidate the usefulness of outside influences in all scenarios. Fundamentally and in regard to individuals, their perspectives reveal different modes of deeming things useful or not adjacent to the sociocultural influences at hand, serving as a conclusive basis for good and bad interpretations.

Interpretations are an integral part of the human experience, as we both consciously and unconsciously perceive everything we come into contact with. As there are several ways to describe an interpretation in the arts and human sciences, the means by which individuals can distinguish between a good and a bad interpretation incorporate references to the self, the social and cultural atmosphere, and the utility of the interpretation to society. Though these markers of a good or bad interpretation exist in their own right, they depend on one another such that we cannot conclude on the goodness or badness of an interpretation without evaluating all of the criteria. Without a society or culture there would be no setting for an interpretation to exist in, therefore no utility, and no individuals to act on the personal aspect of interpreting. In that sense, it can be said that our interpretations can easily get lost in the standards of normalcy and in the present popular opinion of our society, transforming our perception of the pros and cons in an interpretation. Yet, the one absolute and dependable tool to deciding between good from bad shall always be oneself, as it evokes a kind of honesty that is unparalleled.

Works Cited

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