1991

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Morality as Interpretation*

Joseph Raz†

With the growing interest in interpretation as an activity essential in the study of the arts and of society it was inevitable that the question of the relation between morality and interpretation would attract considerable interest. Given that moral views and arguments are expressed in language, are essentially language bound, there is no doubt that the understanding of moral views and argument involves, at least at times, interpretation (of arguments and propositions, etc.). The same can be said of physics. The question is whether morality is interpretative in a way in which physics is not. Some writers have claimed that it is. I will examine the claims and arguments to that effect advanced by Michael Walzer, though much of my argument will be general and not limited to the arguments he explicitly advances.1

THE MAIN THESES

At the beginning of his book Walzer declares his intention to defend the view that “the path of interpretation” in moral philosophy is the one that “accords best with our everyday experience of morality” (p. 3).2 Later on, he explains:

What we do when we argue is to give an account of the actually existing morality. That morality is authoritative for us because it is only by virtue of its existence that we exist as the moral beings we are. Our categories, relationships, commitments, and aspirations are all shaped by, expressed in terms of, the existing morality. [P. 21]

One might say that the moral world is authoritative for us because it provides us with everything we need to live a moral life, including the capacity for reflection and criticism... The capacity for criticism always


† This article grew out of a discussion at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem (in June 1989) in which I criticized Walzer’s views along the lines elaborated upon here. In writing the article I benefited from contributions to that discussion by Amos Funkenstein, Sydney Morgenbesser, Hilary Putnam, and Michael Walzer.

1. Walzer himself does not draw the contrast with physics.

2. Strictly speaking, he only claims there that it is better than what he calls the paths of discovery and invention. His description of those suggests that his targets are some forms of moral realism (discovery) and constructivism, or contractualism (invention). His main argument is, however, a positive one, supporting the path of interpretation, rather than merely an argument for the comparative superiority of the path of interpretation.

Ethics 101 (January 1991): 392–405
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extends beyond the “needs” of the social structure itself and its dominant groups. I do not want to defend a functional position. The moral world and the social world are more or less coherent. Morality is always potentially subversive of class and power. [Pp. 21–22]

The general question about the right thing to do is quickly turned into some more specific question—about the career open to talents, let’s say, and then about equal opportunity, affirmative action, and quotas. These . . . require us to argue about what a career is, what sorts of talents we ought to recognise, whether equal opportunity is a “right.” . . . These questions are pursued within a tradition of moral discourse—indeed they only arise within that tradition—and they are pursued by interpreting the terms of that discourse. The argument is about ourselves; the meaning of our way of life is what is at issue. The general question we finally answer is not quite the one we asked at first. It has a crucial addition: what is the right thing for us to do? [P. 23]

Walzer’s argument is based on the assumption that some moral claims are better, or better founded, than others. This does not commit him to the view that all moral statements are either true or false, but it commits him to holding that some moral claims are true and some false. Where a moral claim is better founded than another, the statement that it is, is true, and its denial false. Moreover, in such cases various statements entailed by the precept that people should act in accordance with the better claim are, presumably, true too.3

Given this assumption, Walzer advances one major and one subsidiary thesis:

T1: Arguments in moral philosophy are interpretations of the morality that exists.

T2: Even so, there is plenty of room for social criticism.

Three main intuitions inspire the theses. First, and most important, is the view that morality is socially dependent, that is, that what is right and wrong for a person to do, what is good or bad, laudable or deplorable, virtuous or revealing of moral defects in character, etc., depends on social practices. Second, morality does not form a system of principles and precepts arranged in some logical way (in the way in which, e.g., Rawls’s theory of justice is a system), nor is there a special method (like decision behind a veil of ignorance, or the test of the categorical imperative) for discovering or testing moral claims. Third, our society is not the only morally decent society that ever existed. Nor is it the morally best society that ever existed, with other societies mere stages of imperfection compared with us. Nor are other morally decent societies in the past or in the present necessarily more like ours than those societies that are less morally appealing, that is, there are ways of being moral and having a morally decent environment which are very unlike our ways of being morally decent, and in environments very unlike ours.

These statements of the intuitions are very vague. The degree to which the intuitions are controversial depends on their more precise formulations. Few people deny that what is rude, and therefore on occasion immoral, depends on

3. As the statement of Walzer’s assumption above makes clear, his view is consistent with the existence of a widespread moral incommensurability, leading to considerable truth value gaps. The general drift of his argument suggests that he regards intrasocial moral issues as largely morally determinate, while contemplating extensive moral incommensurability where intersocial comparisons are in question.
social practices. Many deny that the content of morality is exclusively determined by the social practices of, let us say, the society to which the person whose conduct or character are under consideration belongs. Few people believe that morality is a deductive system in which all true conclusions follow from one simple principle with the addition of purely factual premises. Many believe that all cogent moral precepts are to some degree interdependent.

Walzer’s theses, especially the first and main one, are an attempt to give a more precise articulation to the intuitions. The arguments for the theses are also arguments for the intuitions. I will not challenge or discuss the underlying intuitions. The only matter under examination is the thesis that moral arguments are interpretative. In challenging this thesis I will be challenging that way of understanding and explaining the intuitions. But none of the following arguments is directed against the intuitions themselves. It is possible to argue that the best verdict on Walzer’s theses is “not proven.” There is too much which is left obscure in Walzer’s discussion to enable one to reach any substantive conclusion. In particular, it is unclear what he refers to when he speaks of moral argument being “an interpretation of the morality that exists.” Three clusters of questions remain unresolved.

First, which of the existing moralities does he have in mind? We generally assume that different moralities are practiced or at least avowed (and therefore can be said to exist) in different societies, and, in pluralistic societies, different moralities are practiced or avowed by different sections of the population within a single society. This brief statement is itself merely an abbreviated description of a much more complex phenomenon of divisions and crosscurrents. Which of the different moralities which exist is interpreted in valid moral arguments?

Second, what kind of interpretation is involved in moral argument? Consider some of the activities generally referred to as interpretative, such as that of professional interpreters in multilingual international conventions, the interpretation of musical compositions by conductors, soloists, or orchestras, the interpretation of historical events at the hands of historians, the interpretation of poems by literary critics, the interpretation of dreams by psychoanalysts, the interpretation of experimental data by natural scientists, and the interpretation of legislation by the courts, to mention but a few examples. One need not hold that there is nothing common to them all which merits describing all of them as interpretations to suspect that these multifarious activities differ in important respects. In particular, the standards by which an interpretation is judged successful or not seem to differ. In some cases success is a matter of all or nothing; in others it is a matter of degree. In some cases mutually incompatible interpretations may be equally successful; in others there can be only one (complete) best interpretation. In some cases a good interpretation is an artistic creation. In others it is a matter of scientific conjecture or of logical deduction. Without knowing what kind of interpretation moral argument is meant to be, it is difficult to evaluate the thesis that it is interpretative.4

Third, does Walzer mean moral argument to be an interpretation of the morality that exists to the exclusion of other aspects of existing culture and social practices? To assume so is to assume that morality can be hived off from the rest

4. Saying that it is an interpretation of a social practice, if that is what Walzer has in mind, does not help, as this kind, far from being a culturally recognized brand of interpretation, is a recent ill-defined philosophical invention.
of culture and from other social practices. It further assumes that these other practices do not logically affect the content of morality.\(^5\)

Some aspects of these questions will be taken up below. But in the main I will disregard them. There are, I will argue, difficulties with the thesis that moral arguments are interpretations of the morality that exists which transcend these weighty problems, and which can receive at least a preliminary consideration even before they are resolved.

Before turning to the examination of the theses we must confront the question of their status, especially that of the first, the interpretative thesis. Is the thesis that moral argument is interpretative a thesis about valid or successful moral arguments, that is, about what moral arguments should be like? Or is the thesis a statement of the nature of the run-of-the-mill moral arguments which are made in conversations and discussions among people, in committees, in the media, etc.? Or is it a statement of the nature of the arguments to be found in the writings of moral philosophers? Or, finally, is it itself an interpretation of common moral arguments, or alternatively, of the arguments of moral philosophers?

In spite of some hesitation on the part of Walzer on this point, there is only one possible answer. The interpretative thesis can only be an interpretation of common moral arguments, both philosophical and other. To start with the thesis cannot be a claim about which moral arguments are cogent without being a claim about (at least some) existing moral arguments unless it is coupled with the claim that no cogent moral arguments have ever been advanced. This is not a claim that Walzer makes, nor is it a plausible claim to make. But very few people, if any, have ever advanced moral arguments they engaged in as interpretative, and there is no reason to think that no moral argument which was put forward as a non-interpretative argument was ever cogent. So the thesis cannot be a simple description of (at least some) moral arguments. To be plausible at all, it has to be taken as an interpretation of (at least some) moral arguments.

Can it be taken as interpreting only cogent moral arguments? This can be the case only if the feature of a moral argument which enables one to interpret it as interpretative is a feature which occurs in (all) cogent arguments and is missing in all the others. This is not the way Walzer perceives the situation. The quotation above concerning the way an argument regarding affirmative action might proceed is not meant to apply only to cogent arguments about affirmative action. It fixes on the fact that such arguments proceed through an appeal to notions such as equal opportunities, careers open to talents, etc. Clearly both good and bad arguments have been advanced in these terms. This example shows how unlikely it is that the features of arguments which enable one to interpret them as interpretative will apply to all and only to cogent arguments. It follows that since the thesis must apply to cogent moral arguments, it must apply to (at least some) existing moral arguments, and it follows from that that it must apply to cogent and non-cogent moral arguments, that is, that it is a thesis about the proper interpretation of moral arguments generally.\(^6\)

It also follows that the thesis cannot apply only to philosophical moral arguments. If philosophical moral arguments are cogent only if they are interpretative,

\(^5\) I owe this point to Hilary Putnam.

\(^6\) Though it may allow that some moral arguments, perhaps even some cogent ones, are not interpretations.
then it cannot be the case that there are cogent nonphilosophical moral arguments which are not interpretative. It follows that either there cannot be nonphilosophical cogent moral arguments or they are interpretative. Given that nonphilosophical arguments either reflect or partly constitute the morality that exists, if no nonphilosophical moral arguments are cogent, it is a mystery how it could be that the interpretation of the morality that exists can yield cogent moral arguments. So we must conclude that the interpretative thesis is itself an interpretation of moral arguments (philosophical and nonphilosophical, cogent and faulty) generally.

THE NON-IDENTITY RESULT

Walzer dedicates much attention to his auxiliary thesis, that is, that the interpretative thesis is compatible with social criticism. Much of his discussion is cultural historical and has no philosophical relevance. Walzer’s examples show that various cultures recognize a social role which can be described as that of a social critic, that is, someone who is part of the core of the society and its culture and criticizes it from the inside, invoking its own shared values as the grounds of his criticism. For reasons we need not go into, Walzer is anxious to show that a society can be criticized by insiders from the inside. In his discussion of the phenomenon he underplays the features which make it special and contingent and creates the impression that in his view all sound moral criticism of a society is of this kind. For example, if he does not altogether fail to notice, at the very least he underplays the fact that his illustrations of the critic as an insider are drawn from societies during periods in which their social practices recognized that position. Other societies do not. They regard any substantial social criticism as betrayal and hold that by engaging in radical criticism, even when it sincerely claims to be inspired by common values, the critic has excluded himself from the social fold and has shown himself to be allied with the enemies of the society he criticizes. The possible existence of Walzer’s social critic is contingent on the practices of the society concerned.

Furthermore, Walzer fails to separate the social historical phenomenon which interests him, that is, the possibility of the socially recognized role of a social critic as an insider, from the philosophical problem he is trying to tackle. His philosophical aim is to show that the morality that exists contains grounds for moral criticism. The philosophical aim of the auxiliary thesis is to defend the interpretative thesis from the charge that it is conservative. The charge of conservatism should not be seen as a simple moral accusation of holding morally mistaken views. Rather it is meant to show that the interpretative thesis is a mistaken interpretation of moral arguments. Some moral arguments can and do lead to radical criticism of societies, their institutions and practices. Any account of moral arguments which makes such criticism unintelligible is mistaken. Apparently accepting this point, Walzer claims that his view of moral arguments as interpretations of existing morality is consistent with radical social criticism by social critics.

But this is an inadequate reply to the attempted refutation of the interpretative thesis. Until we are shown that an insider’s criticism is the only intelligible form of criticism, the question is bound to remain, Does the interpretative thesis allow room for all forms of criticism of a society that are intelligible? What of the widespread condemnation across the world of the massacre of students supporting the democracy movement in Beijing in June 1989 (the Tienanmen Square example)? Many of the critics were outsiders to the society the actions of whose
government were condemned, and few of them bothered even to consider the question whether their criticism can be borne out by an interpretation of Chinese values. Most of them, one suspects, would regard that question as irrelevant to the cogency of their criticism. Let us assume that their criticism is intelligible and cogent, and an example of a common kind of moral claim. If so, then the interpretative thesis is acceptable only if it can show that such moral criticism, which is not the social criticism Walzer's second thesis addresses, is based on interpretative arguments. Some aspects of these arguments will resurface later. For the present I wish only to emphasize that they are not meant as a refutation of Walzer's view. They merely show that if the interpretative thesis is to be shown to be viable, a stronger thesis than T2 needs to be established, that is, that moral criticism generally is consistent with the view that moral arguments are an interpretation of existing morality.

Leaving this point on one side, there is one conclusion of Walzer's auxiliary thesis (even in the limited scope he gives it) which is crucial for the validity of his views. Walzer's thesis is that the interpretative thesis leaves room for social (which is a form of moral) criticism. Moral criticism of what? It clearly leaves room for criticizing society and its institutions for failing to live up to the morality that exists. On the assumption\(^7\) that the morality that exists is nothing but the morality of the society criticized, saying that society and its institutions can be criticized by the existing morality is no more than saying that society may fail to live up to its own moral ideals. To affirm that is no more than to affirm the possibility of hypocrisy, duplicity, bad faith, self-deception, etc. But if this is all that T2 establishes, then it fails to do its job in defending the interpretative thesis from the charge of a conservatism which makes the possibility of many moral arguments unintelligible. To rebut this criticism T2 must show that there can be social criticism of social morality itself.

Many moral arguments are addressed against various aspects of the morality that exists. Vegetarians and environmentalists criticize the existing morality concerning our attitude to nonhuman animals and to the natural environment. Feminists criticize the existing morality concerning the relations between the sexes and gender roles. Examples of moral arguments from within a society, that is, ones which can qualify as social criticism addressed at the existing morality of the society concerned, are legion. And so are the moral arguments addressed against the existing moralities of foreign countries. Admittedly, the notion of an existing morality is problematical. There is no need, however, to attempt a comprehensive clarification of this idea. All we need are two assumptions clearly made by Walzer, namely, first, that the existing morality is positively correlated to the moral beliefs of people, and to at least some of their social practices. Second, that different moralities exist in different societies (however societies

7. Alternatively, Walzer might show that the Tienanmen Square example belongs to an exceptional non-interpretative kind of argument. This line of argument is unpromising. Those British people who condemned the massacre in Beijing are likely to have felt that they would have condemned a massacre in Trafalgar Square for exactly the same reasons, and that those reasons are typical of many of their moral considerations when applied to conditions in British jails, for example, or to administrative detention in Northern Ireland. This makes it difficult to regard the Tienanmen Square example as displaying a special kind of moral argument.

8. To be considered below.
may be individuated). I will therefore assume that T2 asserts among other things that the interpretative thesis leaves room for a criticism of the morality that exists.

It follows from this understanding of T2 that morality is not identical with (any) existing morality. One can avoid this conclusion only by holding (1) that morality can change, and (2) that morality may be inconsistent. I will demonstrate these points by showing how T2 and the identity assumption yield the two mentioned conclusions.

**Moral Change**

First, I will show that if existing moralities can be morally criticized, sometimes successfully, then existing morality can change. If existing morality is morality, then morality can change. To show that this is so, we have to distinguish cases of (alleged) moral advance in which previously held views and previous practices are rejected as mistaken, from moral change in which they are rejected on the ground that while they were right for their time, they are no longer valid. If moral criticism of existing morality, the possibility of which is asserted by Walzer in T2, can be sound, then morality must be capable of developing away from its criticized condition. This does not assume that every or any sound criticism of morality will be effective in generating such a development. It merely assumes that such a development is logically possible, that it is coherent. This means that the possibility of sound moral criticism of existing morality presupposes that either moral advance or moral change (or both) is possible.

But on the identity assumption, there is no possibility of moral advance in existing morality, for moral advance assumes that the morality that exists now is right and the morality that it displaced was wrong. That last assumption is precisely what the identity thesis denies. Since (tautologically) morality is correct morality if existing morality is morality, then existing morality (at any given point in time) is correct, and cannot be wrong. Therefore, if morality is existing morality, moral advance is impossible. As we saw, this means that if sound criticism of existing morality is possible, then so is moral change.

It is a commonplace of much moral philosophy that while people’s moral views and practices may change, morality cannot. It is not obvious how precisely one should understand the no-change principle. Clearly, there can be some moral change. When I was young, for example, it was morally wrong for me to drive a car. Now it is morally permissible for me to do so. Before the age of rapid transport it was wrong for a person with ailing parents to go fifty miles away from home, for he would not have been able to get back home in a hurry if needed. Today the moral situation has changed. Some moral changes reflect changes in customs and mores rather than in technology. In what sense can morality be supposed to be unchanging?

The following seems a promising way of understanding the issue of moral change. Any moral change is explained by reference to the effect of a change on unchanging principles. It is wrong to drive when one does not possess the skill and capacities to control safety the vehicle one is driving. Children do not

9. This is, of course, consistent with individual moral advance. That is, the argument shows only that existing morality cannot morally advance, for that would entail attributing to it moral mistakes. No problems are involved with the thought that individuals may fall prey to moral mistakes and may make genuine advances by ridding themselves of such mistakes.
possess the required judgment, strength, and skills. Adults normally do. One has a duty to aid one’s parents when they are ill. Therefore, one should make sure that one is in a position to do so. Before the advent of modern transport this meant remaining close to home at times when one’s parents were ill. Today, with rapid transport, this is no longer true; the material distances are not the same. If any moral change presupposes an unchanging moral background, then morality can be said to be unchanging.

Nothing in this argument assumes that there are ultimate unchanging moral principles. It is possible that any given principle is capable of change, since there is a possibility of indefinite regress. Even the principles which appear to us most unmovable may turn out to be suited to certain circumstances and not to others. But to make sense of that will require pointing to an unchanging moral doctrine in terms of which changing circumstances can account for the moral change. Furthermore, nothing in this argument presupposes that there is a clear division between facts and values. It is not assumed that any moral change is accounted for by a change of facts against a background of unchanging morality, if that is a coherent doctrine. Only a difference, relative to every instance of moral change, between changing circumstances and unchanging principles is assumed.

Must there be a way of explaining moral change? Perhaps all that one can say of moral change is that something was right until now and something different and incompatible is right from now (the boundary need not be precise), and that is it. There may be no explanation of the change. But to say this is to accept that morality is unintelligible to us. If in principle we can explain, if we can make intelligible why one thing is right from today, we must also be able to explain why it was not right before. Presumably, the explanation of what makes it right now does not apply to the time up to now. So it provides the constant which explains change. If it does apply to the time up to now and yet we hold that in spite of that, what is right from now was not right before, then it is a mystery in what sense the explanation explains why this is right from now. By that explanation the same was right before now as well. So at best it is an incomplete explanation. So, short of giving up the intelligibility of morality, an explanation of moral change where it occurs must be in principle available.

Must such an explanation proceed through finding a constant element which makes some changing feature of the situation account for the moral change? I cannot see what else is possible. The only escape from this conclusion seems to me to be that the constant element which explains moral change need not itself be a moral consideration or principle. But I cannot think of an account showing how it could be anything else.

Can there be a special kind of moral change which is interpretative change, which does not presuppose a persisting moral principle? This kind of change might occur when members of a society reinterpret their previous practices and beliefs and come to see them in a new light (leading to a change of both practices and beliefs). This may be possible, but it leaves open the question: From their new perspective can they think of their previous views (i.e., their interpretations) as having been wrong and supplanted by better ones, or must they think of them as having been right for their time but now superseded by something which is right for the new times? Interpretative change does not escape the considerations advanced above.

My argument is (a) that the possibility of moral criticism of existing morality entails, on the identity assumption, that there is moral change, and (b) that any
moral change presupposes an unchanging moral background. Is there any conflict between the two conclusions? Since $b$ allows considerable room for moral change, there is conflict only if $a$ requires the possibility of moral change of a kind which the argument above does not allow. That it does is not obvious. The limits of moral change I have argued for do not immunize any particular moral principle from the change. It is true that T2 by itself is consistent with forms of moral change which are inconsistent with the argument I advanced. For example, it is consistent with the possibility that existing morality will be so radically transformed that it will have nothing in common with its ancestor. Or that it will change with regard to its most abstract principles, continuity being provided at the level of middle-range principles. This second possibility seems to be in line with much of what we know of changes in moral practices and beliefs. It also seems very much in tune with the spirit of the general views of supporters of the interpretative thesis, including Walzer. The lesson of my argument is that if such changes in existing morality are to be entertained, then morality cannot be identified with social morality.

**Morality and Inconsistency**

Whatever one's view regarding moral change, the non-identity of morality with existing morality, given T2, follows straightforwardly from a simple argument: T2 states that there can be moral criticism of existing morality. If morality is existing morality, then existing morality provides grounds for criticizing itself. This means more than that the practices which constitute or which underpin existing morality contain the seeds for their own transformation. This last claim is an unexceptional claim that certain social practices are unstable. Social theory has done much to explain the various structures which make social practices intrinsically unstable. But T2, on the identity assumption, claims more. It states that existing morality contains propositions which are grounds for rejecting some propositions of existing morality. Since morality includes only (can be correctly stated only by) true propositions, it follows that according to T2 and the identity assumption, morality includes grounds for believing that true propositions are false. Moreover, since according to T2 such moral criticism of existing morality can be successful, it follows that on these assumptions it is epistemically possible that certain moral propositions are false.

The epistemic possibility entailed by T2 applies to people who know that existing morality is morality. For example, according to T2 and the identity assumption, a person, call him Michael, who believes in both must believe that it is possible given all he knows that certain propositions of existing morality are false. This commits him to believing that it is possible that morality contains propositions which are both true (because they correctly state the content of morality) and false (because there may be other—equally true—moral propositions providing adequate grounds to hold them to be false). Since this is impossible, Michael must reject either T2 or the identity assumption. Since Michael Walzer endorses T2, he is committed to rejecting the identity assumption.

**WHOSE MORALITY SHOULD BE INTERPRETED?**

The rejection of the identity assumption cannot be avoided by abandoning T2, for as we saw, T2 is essential for the plausibility of the interpretative thesis. Can the interpretative thesis survive the rejection of the identity assumption? One's intuitions suggest that it cannot. The interpretative thesis seems particularly
appealing when understood as saying that moral arguments consist in the interpretation of morality. But perhaps in this form the thesis is too strong for its own good. Whether or not moral argument has anything to do with interpretation, it seems plausible that it proceeds from within morality (though not exclusively so). If it contains interpretation it is plausible that it should include interpretations of moral propositions. But putting matters in this way denudes the interpretative thesis, as understood by Walzer and its other supporters, of its point. It is bound to seem to them a trivialization of the thesis. Its poignancy derives from the point that moral argument is the interpretation of existing morality. This phrase is now too ambiguous for us to continue using it. As we saw, it suggests on the one hand that it is positively correlated to existing practices and to common beliefs and on the other hand that it is morality (i.e., that existing morality is morality).

Having rejected the second point, let us replace “existing morality” with “social morality,” a phrase whose use will remain suitably vague. The only definite commitment involved in its use is to a positive correlation between social morality and social practices and common beliefs. This correlation enables us to relate social morality to particular groups. They can be said to be the social moralities of the groups with whose practices and beliefs they correlate. I will refer to a social morality of an individual if the individual belongs to a group whose social morality it is. All these notions are very problematical, and if the interpretative thesis survives, they should all receive detailed scrutiny.

Some familiar questions cannot be avoided. Whose social morality should be interpreted to produce a sound moral conclusion? Suppose that Adam is conversing with Angela about Beth’s conduct or character. Is Adam’s claim to be supported by an interpretation of his social morality or by that of Angela, or by that of Beth, or by some combination of the three? Walzer provides no answer, as his discussion assumes that all three share the same social morality. That assumption can always be relied upon only if one accepts the view, inimical to Walzer’s thought, that there is and can only be one social morality. Given that there are several social moralities, and that it is possible and proper for people who belong to a group which has one social morality to form judgments concerning the character and conduct of people belonging to other groups with different social moralities, the familiar questions cannot be avoided.

Let us consider first the possibility that Beth’s social morality (i.e., the social morality of the group she is a member of) is the relevant one. This supposition has two unwelcome consequences:

1. The interpretative thesis so understood, that is, that moral argument is an interpretation of the social morality of the person under discussion, is an incorrect interpretation of moral argument. One example will stand for many. Few, if any, of those members of the Western democracies or of other cultures (excluding the Chinese) who condemned in their hearts, in word, or in deed the Tienanmen Square Massacre of June 1989 regarded the interpretation of the relevant Chinese culture as their argument in defense of their condemnation. By and large, their position was: The massacre is inexcusable, and if Chinese social morality condones it, so much the worse for Chinese social morality.

2. Either Hitler was right to adopt the Final Solution or he would have been right had he succeeded better to change his society after his own image. I am not alleging that the Final Solution was supported by the best interpretation of the German social morality of the time, nor am I claiming that if it was not, then it would have been relatively easy for the Nazis to intensify their actions so that
German social morality would have changed to suit their purposes. It is possible that such changes require long periods and are only under limited intentional control of anyone, however powerful. My point is merely that the interpretative thesis understood as requiring the interpretation of the social morality of the people whose conduct and character are under consideration creates the possibility that the Final Solution was just. Its justice becomes a contingent matter. It all depends on German social practices at the time.

There is one way of escaping this second conclusion. One may endorse a view of how a social morality (or social practices) should be interpreted which makes it impossible to construct an interpretative argument supporting genocide on the basis of any social morality, be it what it may (alternatively, it may make it impossible to view genocide as supported by a social morality, whatever the practices and beliefs of the relevant community may be). The problem with this escape route is that it relies on methods of interpretation which are recommended on the ground that they rule out certain results.\(^\text{10}\) This means that certain moral claims (e.g., that genocide is wrong) are presupposed by the interpretative method and are not supported by it, which refutes the interpretative thesis.\(^\text{11}\)

Given these considerations, we can abandon the supposition that Beth’s social morality is to be interpreted by arguments concerning her conduct or character. Let us then consider the possibility that it is Adam’s social morality which counts. Given this supposition, the interpretative thesis has no bearing on the third intuition inspiring Walzer’s writings on this issue, namely, the intuition that ours is not the only morally decent society. Given that even when we morally judge other people who belong to remote cultures we do so on the basis of the interpretation of our social morality, there is nothing in the interpretative thesis to lead to the moral pluralism favored by Walzer. The interpretative thesis can guarantee moral pluralism only if it requires us to interpret a plurality of social moralities. Since it does not do so, it does not in any obvious way respond to the pluralistic intuition.

The difficulty with understanding the interpretative thesis as calling for the interpretation of the speaker’s social morality is that it entails that moral truth is perspectival. The reason is simple and familiar. Adam and Angela may have different social moralities, whose interpretation may yield inconsistent verdicts on Beth’s actions or character. Since moral claims well supported by an interpretation of the speaker’s social morality are true, it follows either that morality is self-contradictory or that Adam’s verdict on Beth is true for him, or rather for anyone who shares his perspective, and Angela’s verdict is true for her, or rather for anyone who shares her perspective. That means that moral truth is perspectival. Each social morality defines a perspective and every speaker’s truth holds only for those who share the same social morality.

The only way to avoid this conclusion is to hold that people can form moral judgments only on people of the same social morality. But this would be a moral

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10. There is no logical necessity here, but I can think of no other reason why such morally biased methods of interpretation should be accepted.

11. Cannot they both be yielded by the interpretative method and be used to support it? Such bootstrapping would be acceptable if it does not consist in a narrow circle. I do not know how to construct such an argument.
judgment which, as the Tienanmen Square example shows, is not a true interpretation of my social morality. Therefore, this escape route is blocked.

The perspectival view of moral truth revives the problem illustrated by the example of the Final Solution in a somewhat different form. According to the perspectival view, it is possible that it is true for Hitler (i.e., for anyone who shares the perspective which is in fact his) that genocide is permissible, and that the Final Solution was morally required. It is true that for me this is false. But why should I care especially about what is true for me, rather than about what is true for Hitler? After all, it is his actions and character which are under consideration. Should we not judge him by what is true for him? Could he be blamed for not conforming to moral principles which are true for me but not for him? I raise these as genuine questions. Possibly truth just means that what matters to me is what is true for me. But the notion of perspectival truth is very obscure, and its credentials and implications have never been worked out properly.

THE REFUTATION

So far I have drawn attention to some of the implications of, and as yet unresolved, difficulties with the interpretative thesis. One consideration seems, however, to tell decisively against the thesis. As noted at the outset, regarding moral arguments as interpretative raises the question of interpreting “interpretation” in this context. But one thing about interpretation is clear: it is an intentional activity.

We cannot interpret except when we intend to. Suppose that Angela (having earlier told him of a dream of hers) says something to Adam, to which he replies: “This could be the interpretation of your (i.e., Angela’s) dream.” In this case it was Adam’s interpretation, not Angela’s. She, admittedly, provided the content. But the intention to take it as an interpretation was Adam’s. The same holds for any interpretation of a Shakespearean play, or of experimental scientific findings, or of the Soviet Union’s European policy. Many things are possible interpretations. But one does not offer an interpretation just because one puts a possible interpretation forward. One has to offer it as an interpretation to be interpreting, though one may intend it as an interpretation under a different description. For example, one may intend to translate the speech, and one’s translation is also an interpretation. Or one may intend to perform the piano sonata, and one’s performance is also an interpretation. This is due to the fact that translations and performances are interpretations, and anyone who knows what they are knows that. Notice in particular that the fact that one was inspired by a poem to write another, or to write a piece of prose, does not make one’s writing an interpretation of the poem. Interpretation cannot be explained in purely causal terms. It has to be meant as such.

It follows that moral arguments are not interpretations, for they are not meant as such. Consider ordinary arguments against deceit. Deceit, people say, is unfair—it is taking unfair advantage of others. Or they will say that to deceive is to use a person and not to treat him as a person. Or they will say that deceit undermines trust and raises suspicions which make communication more difficult, to the long-term detriment of everyone. Various other arguments or variants on

12. Could the proposition that people can morally criticize only those sharing their own social morality be supported as a nonmoral proposition, that is, on nonmoral grounds? I do not see a way of doing so.
arguments will be advanced. But none of them is meant to be about the correct interpretation of our social morality. They do not even feel similar to arguments about the practices people have and the interpretation one should put on them. I do not deny that reference to social practices plays an important role in such arguments. The other day, while visiting another country, I said to my son: "Everyone asks me how you like it here and I have to say that I do not know." "But," he retorted, "no one expects a truthful answer to this question." If this is the expectation, then no one would be deceived by whatever I may say in reply to the question, and I need not worry that I do not know the correct answer.

Practices are central to the question of when one is deceived. But they are only marginal to the question of why it is wrong to deceive. Similar considerations apply to defamation, violating property rights, insults, showing kindness, demonstrating one's love, pulling rank, etc. In other cases (e.g., causing serious bodily injury, denying people food, or exposing them to severe cold, etc.), practices figure hardly at all in moral arguments. Similar points apply to the examples used by Walzer, and cited above. Social practices are relevant for establishing facts about discrimination, its effects, and the most effective ways of combating it. It is less obvious what they have to do with justifying the underlying moral position, for example, that the state should take action to combat discrimination by, let us say, encouraging anyone who benefits from state funds to adopt certain policies, etc. There are, of course, social practices, which either conform to or are at odds with such views. But it is not clear why I or anyone else should be deterred from advocating a moral position which is at odds with the best interpretation of such policies.

We know that people rarely advocate moral positions which do not have roots in the social morality of their community, past or present. That fact is often explained as relevant to their ability to gain access to the media, or to their rhetorical effectiveness with the public only. It seems to me plausible to assume that the rootedness in one's culture has greater significance. But even so, it does not follow that moral arguments are interpretations of social morality. To be that, they have to refer to social morality as a reason for a moral claim. This they do not normally do, except in the circumscribed way described. There are numerous analogies in other fields for a connectedness which cannot be explained in terms of reasons. There is more than an accidental connection between the nerve structure of my sense organs and my ability to see that the lamp in front of me is yellow. It does not follow and is, in fact, false, that the neural structure of my sense organs is a reason for believing that the lamp is yellow.

One may object to this argument on the ground that it takes too much at face value. The interpretative thesis claims that the correct interpretation of what moral arguers intend is that they intend it as an interpretation of their social morality. There are two ways of developing this objection. The first is to allege that moral arguers, whatever their conscious intentions, have an unconscious intention to interpret their social morality. However, I know of no reason to believe in such an unconscious intent. More promising is the second way of developing the objection, which is to suggest that moral arguments which are meant to be discoveries of unknown moral truths, etc., are better understood if they are redescribed as interpretations. Therefore, they are intentional interpretations, but not under this description.

The difficulty with this way of defending the thesis is that it does violence to the intentional aspect of interpretation. As we saw, this allows some redescription,
but only on condition that the new description is such that those who understand know that if one applies, the other does as well. The redescription of an argument advanced as working out what is the only rational thing for a moral agent to do, or as working out God’s will, etc., as an interpretation of the social morality, does not meet this condition. Among other considerations, such redescription, if adequate, denies one the possibility of criticizing those people for engaging in the wrong sort of argument.

This argument shows only that not all moral arguments are interpretative. No one can claim that no moral argument is interpretative in part. As I suggested earlier, clearly, many are interpretative in part. But it can be shown that normal moral arguments are not entirely interpretative of social morality. To interpret is to put forward (under suitable conditions) something (such as a performance or a statement) as being or rendering the meaning of something. An interpretation of social morality is just that. It states the content (meaning) of social morality. This can be a moral argument only if morality is (identical with) social morality. As was shown earlier, it is not. Therefore, while the interpretation of social morality can play a role in moral argument, moral argument cannot consist of just such an interpretation.