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Maureen Linker
University of Michigan

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Comments on Katharina Stevens' "Charity for Moral Reasons"

MAUREEN LINKER

Professor of Philosophy
University of Michigan-Dearborn
mlinker@umich.edu

In *Charity for Moral Reason*, Katharina Stevens asks the question: Are there moral reasons for being charitable when engaging in argument with interlocutors? Stevens' answer is that indeed there are *prima facie* moral reasons for a kind of charity and it applies in all cases of argument with an interlocuter. Stevens' version of charity is stronger than Govier's (1987) more moderate account and though it applies in all cases where we are *in* an argument with another (Argument2) it does so to a greater or lesser degree depending on context and argument structure.

In terms of moral reasons for being charitable, Stevens provides two arguments. The first is a deontological argument that concludes with the claim that not applying a principle of charity in argument with an interlocuter results in humiliation or as Stevens describes it, "the denial of owed respect." The second is a consequentialist argument that concludes with the claim that a failure to apply a principle of charity results in a harm to one's interlocuter in that she is not understood as providing reasons or contributing meaningfully to the argument. Another way of thinking of this harm, according to Stevens, is that the interlocuter is treated as an 'outsider' unworthy of being treated as a participant in the argument. While Stevens' recognizes that this harm may be felt in varying degrees depending on the arguer and the context, there is nevertheless a *prima facie* moral reason to apply charity to avoid inflicting unnecessary harm.

As Stevens summarizes, "I rely so heavily on considerations based on the importance of respecting dignity and of expressly treating others as valuable and valued members of the community."

Stevens also considers a moral argument against charity. She cites Govier's very succinct concern:

A fundamental problem is that the otherness of other minds and cultures may be lost if charity goes too far. It may be true that without some presumptions of shared beliefs and a shared logic, understanding of language is impossible. [...] With too much charity we will seek understanding of others to find only ourselves. (Govier, 1987, omissions hers)

The concern with "toxic charity" as Stevens describes it, is that interpreting your interlocuter as reasonable can result in subsuming her claims under your own interpretive framework so that they conform to your own biases and assumptions. The solution to this problem for Stevens is to invoke Raz's (1979) *detached point of view* up to the limit where it does not become a *deep disagreement* in Foeglin's (2005) sense. As Stevens notes, some attitude or another will inevitably influence argument interpretation and what she is recommending is that attitude be *charity*. Nevertheless, Stevens does not believe charitable interpretation, or more precisely charitable listening, is easy to apply. She notes Arbor's (2011) point that, "Charitable listening that is aimed at identifying the reasonable core in another's expressions is not only seldom practiced, but can also be energy and time consuming, stressful and even painful." Despite the

challenges however, Stevens says that charity should serve as an ideal goal in argument, “always pursued, never fully realized.” Her stronger version of this principle, relative to Govier’s more moderate charity, “...adds that we assume that our interlocutors *have* reasons to give that, at least from their point of view and in their version of how the world works, actually provide support for their claims.”

There are a variety of important and insightful points in Stevens’ essay for argument theorists and teachers of logic and critical thinking. The interplay between morality, epistemology, and metaphysics for instance that underlie reason and argumentation. The important point that arguers and their interlocutors, when representing reasons, are doing something fundamentally human and their identity as knowers should be respected as part of a reasoning community. The equally important point that epistemic imperialism is a risk of toxic charity when an arguer with more social power and privilege, presumes to interpret an interlocutor on the social margins (who may have less power but greater epistemic advantages). In addition to these insights and contributions, I have just a few points for further consideration that might help develop Stevens’ argument even further.

The first has to do with Stevens point that “Especially where an interpreter is in an advantaged social position, she can easily and maybe even accidentally bulldoze all over the reasoning of others simply by being careless. Wherever possible, interpreters should therefore try to create opportunity for her interlocutors to determine whether the shape their argument takes in the interpreter’s hands still represents their reasons” (p. 22). I would suggest that it is often not carelessness that is the culprit in bulldozing over the reasoning of others with less social advantages, rather it is the good intentions of those with social privilege combined with the belief that a *detached point of view* really can produce epistemic benefits.

For example, consider a case involving a colleague of mine at a different university, let’s call him Fred, who identifies as an activist and a male feminist at his home campus. Fred is a psychology professor and at the time I recount here, was serving as a member of a campus committee made up mostly of female staff and students. During a post-meeting conversation some how the topic of cosmetics came up and Fred began to make some claims about how “unnatural” the use of cosmetics was and how much more beautiful women would look if they refrained from wearing lipstick and eye makeup, etc. In addition, Fred noted the incredible profits made by cosmetic companies and the unethical use of animals in cosmetic testing. He concluded that women should be freed from the shackles of cosmetic use and learn to love their “natural” and hence more beautiful selves.

After sharing his views on cosmetics with the staff and students present at the meeting, Fred was shocked to find that many of the women present did not agree with him. In fact, he was told by several that his comments made them angry and they strongly disagreed with his assessment. Believing himself to be a feminist and a great supporter of women, Fred could not understand the reaction. He was absolutely puzzled and had thought that if anything, his comments would have been met with enthusiastic appreciation. How liberating it would be for women to hear a man criticize the use of makeup! When he shared the story with me he said “I don’t get it! These women were obviously very defensive!”

After reconsidering his estimation that the women were simply reacting defensively he engaged in further conversation with at a subsequent meeting and asked for and received the following explanations: “I wear makeup because I like the way I look wearing it. I don’t wear it to please anyone else.” And “If I didn’t wear makeup I don’t think I would look very professional at work.” And “I wear makeup because it is part of dressing up and that feels very

feminine and fun to me.” When recounting these explanations to me in our later conversation Fred attempted to use something along the lines of the principle of charity in his interpretation of the women’s responses. For example he said, “I can see why they felt the need to defend a practice that they engage in regularly. No one wants to feel that they are consciously making a bad choice every day. But it seems to me that they are incapable of addressing the larger points about women being unsatisfied with the way they look and their willingness to cave into social expectations that are costly and morally problematic.” Fred came to the conclusion that the women at the meeting could not defend their makeup use because doing so would make explicit their complicit acceptance of a demeaning practice. Ultimately, Fred interpreted the women’s responses as reasonable relative to their internalization of a sexist and patriarchal framework. In his initial attempt to interpret the women at the meeting, Fred did not consider his own particular identity and the properties associated with it in the context of the conversation. His effort to initially find some reasonable way to interpret the staff and student reactions amounted to his assuming that because the women wore makeup, their defense of the practice was automatic and inevitable. Though he believed they were sincere when they said that they did not feel compelled by his argument and that they enjoyed wearing makeup and that they felt their appearance with makeup was more professional, he nevertheless viewed their sincerity as the result of their unreflective acceptance of social pressures. As Fred summed it up at that point “If the women assume that wearing makeup is actually an individual ‘choice’ and they could just as well choose not to--then of course their responses are reasonable. The problem is their failure to see that they are all collectively responding to social pressure and not really making a choice.”

The point of this case then is to illustrate how the principle of charity, even in Stevens’ stronger version, lacks a moral accounting of the interpreter’s own framework in judgments of another’s reasonableness or lack thereof. Fred in this case did respect his interlocutors and he assumed their reasonableness. He did not commit the harm of interpreting them outside the bounds of reasonableness and he did seek out further evidence when he judged their initial reactions to be so puzzling. Yet their explanations and justifications did little to lead him to revise his initial interpretation. He came to see the women as reasonable relative to an oppressive framework. Yet, Fred’s framework and starting assumptions remain unchanged. Further, his moral, on Stevens grounds, application of the principle of charity provides no way to account for the power dynamics inherent in judgments of good or bad reasoning. While it provided a starting point in setting out norms of interpretation that promote fairness and avoid harm, charity in this case is nevertheless limited with regard to real self-reflexivity particularly in regard to social dynamics, privilege and power and how these factors can play a role in an arguer’s reconstructions of others’ reasonableness. If I adopt a principle of charity when interpreting an individual whose social experiences are vastly different from my own, I run the risk of merely applying my experiences as “the norm” thereby missing out on the actual evidence and experiences the individual in question is presenting. And the point is I can do this and still be acting morally and with good intentions. There is a kind of paternalism inherent in this conception of charity if fairness and a willingness not to harm are the only moral grounds. Instead charity should require an awareness that the very things you assume about others and not yourself, may be the result of a willful ignorance of your own social advantages. In this way a more virtue ethics approach might be a better way to ground the moral dimensions of charity. Training in virtuous listening, reflexive self-awareness, and an understanding of the social dimensions of arguers and argument contexts could avoid some of the problematic elements of Fred’s interpretations of his interlocutors that perpetuate a patriarchal status quo.

The second point has to do with assuming some of the moral responsibilities of Stevens' arguer in cases where the interpreter has less social privilege than their interlocuter. Returning to the case of Fred, imagine one woman on the committee, a staff member in her 50s we'll call Sue, who hears Fred's argument for the "unnaturalness" of make-up and instead of thinking, "Who cares what this guy thinks?" or "He is in no position to pontificate about women's cosmetic use." Instead approaches Fred's claims as coming from an equally capable reasoner who is part of her community of reasoners. This would mean that Sue would need to draw Fred's attention to the power differences that existed in the context between him, a tenured male professor, and the other participants, mostly women staff and students who were either significantly older or younger than he was. Sue could ask Fred to try and imagine how the views he expressed regarding female beauty and "naturalness" might be felt from the point of view of older female staff members and younger female students. And Sue could point out that Fred's initial conclusion that the women simply defended their use of makeup because they were complicit in their own subjugation failed to account for how he could be creating a context where the women felt the need to defend themselves. Sue could note that his pronouncements about makeup use are part of a larger history of men making pronouncements about what constitutes "beauty" for a woman and his appeal to "natural" beauty as some pure standard is itself essentialist and objectifying. Sue could add that the power differentials that exist within the context could make it hard for the women to say outright "Who cares what you think is beautiful!" or "I don't care that I'm not living up to your standards." For individuals in a context with less social power, Sue could explain, a seemingly protective defensive reaction could often be a safer alternative to calling out the privilege of those in power.

In this case, the argument would certainly be more effectively shaped, with Sue's contributions and it would provide new or different information for Fred. But at what cost? Sue shoulders the burden in this argument, raised by Fred, by having to clue him in not only to her perspective but the gaps in his own. And while Sue might incur risks by speaking truth to power, it is the additional work that she has to do to make her views more understandable to Fred that seems to raise the moral stakes. I worry that on Stevens' account the greater moral labor will fall on those with less social power and more to lose. Interpreting another as reasonable, when they are well-intentioned but socially unaware of their own privilege, is work making for the socially disadvantaged. Again, perhaps a more virtue-oriented approach where training in empathy, self-awareness and self-reflexivity are central, could address some of these concerns.