CHAPTER 3

Tracing the Hermeneutic Circle: 
Articulating an Ontical Study of Moral Conflicts

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Introduction

In this chapter I shall lay out an approach to interpretive investigation 
that follows Heidegger’s lead in the hermeneutic phenomenology of Being and 
Time (1927/1962). My aim is to explicate a specific interpretive research project 
and thereby address both the particular course of interpretation and the 
broader concerns of interpretive method. The following topics will be addressed: 
the character of interpretation; the relationship between interpretation and 
practical understanding; preparing a starting place for interpretation; the 
articulation that interpretation involves; ways to foster this articulation; and 
the outcome of interpretation.

The Focus of the Study: Moral Action

The study I shall discuss was an investigation of practical moral conflicts: 
conflicts that arose and were dealt with in ongoing social interaction. I chose 
this topic to make a break with interview discussions of morality, especially 
interviews about hypothetical dilemmas, such as Kohlberg’s well-known work 
with the Heinz dilemma (e.g., Kohlberg, Levine & Hewer, 1983). The use of 
interviews as a method of access to the psychology of morality makes sense 
only as long as one accepts there is a kind of engagement common to situa-
tions of both speculative thought and practical action. From the hermeneutic 
perspective this is a questionable assumption (cf. Packer 1985c). My interest 
was in the way conflicts are recognized and dealt with as and when they arise, 
since I suspected that immediate responses to moral discord would show 
characteristics absent from their subsequent discussion and review.

The conflicts took place among college students playing a zero-sum 
competitive game for points worth a penny each. Ten of these analogue task
sessions, each with a different group of eight young adults, comprised the corpus for analysis. The young men and women were friends, generally living in proximity in college dorms, but they were divided into two teams for the game. The setting of their interaction was, then, an artificial analogue rather than naturally occurring. The reasons for this were pragmatic rather than methodological or theoretical: in particular a need to satisfy the unwritten requirement of a traditional psychology doctoral program that research be manipulative, which precluded studying "found" conflicts. Certainly the setting was somewhat contrived, nonetheless it satisfied the needs of the project. In particular, those involved seemed to take the sessions seriously.

Video recordings of the students' exchanges were the records of interaction with which interpretation began. My inquiry centered on a particular kind of event that occurred in four of the sessions: one where the team that was winning cheated on their friends soon after making an agreement to cooperate with them.

A detailed report of this inquiry has been published elsewhere (Packer 1985b). Rather than simply summarize the project I want to re-examine the course of interpretation, to explain what motivated the inquiry and determined its direction. The interpretation in this study involved a praxis that was not made fully explicit at the time. The various traces left by that praxis—notes, drafts of written reports—provide material for an explication of method that moves between a theory of what interpretation involves and the examination of a particular inquiry. This aim may at first glance seem an egotistic one, but my intention is not to demonstrate possession of any special interpretive ability or skill, but to lay out for critical examination efforts made in a process of inquiry that anyone can engage in.

The Character of Interpretation

In *Being and Time* Heidegger undertook a kind of investigation that can provide guidance to interpretive research in psychology and the other social and human sciences. The investigation was a hermeneutic phenomenological one, addressed to the question of the meaning of human being ("Dasein") and of Being in general. Heidegger argued that interpretation is the necessary kind of inquiry for a being that always has an understanding, albeit unarticulated, of the kind of being it is.

Heidegger's analysis was an "ontological" one: describing fundamental structures of human being. A hermeneutic research project in psychology will be what Heidegger terms "ontical": examining specific ways of being in a particular setting or settings, but it will nonetheless share certain simi-
larities of approach with the investigation carried out in *Being and Time*. As Heidegger stated:²

... this hermeneutic [i.e., *Being and Time*] contains the roots of what can be called 'hermeneutic' only in a derivative sense: the methodology of those humane sciences which are historiological in character (Heidegger 1927/1962, 62).

A "historiological" science is one that deals with the course of particular human events rather than with the fundamental ontological structures of human being.

Before we can consider the details of the moral conflict study, we must consider two preliminaries. The first concerns the relationship between interpretation and understanding, the second the work necessary to reach the appropriate starting point for an interpretive analysis.

**The Relationship between Interpretation and Understanding**

Interpretation has a close internal connection with engaged practical activity, and with the practical understanding that is involved in such activity. The point that deserves emphasis here is that interpretation always starts in, and is an articulation of, the interpreter's everyday, common-sense understanding of what is going on (cf. Packer 1985b, 1985c.)

Any interpretation which is to contribute understanding, must already have understood what is to be interpreted. This is a fact that has always been remarked, even if only in the area of derivative ways of understanding and interpretation, such as philological Interpretation (Heidegger 1927/1962, 94).

When we conduct an interpretation of an interaction that we have either participated in or witnessed, we are bringing about a "development" of our practical understanding of that interaction:

This development of the understanding we call interpretation. In it the understanding appropriates understandingly that which is understood by it. In interpretation, understanding does not become something different. It becomes itself. Such interpretation is grounded existentially in understanding; the latter does not arise from the former. Nor is interpretation the acquiring of information about what is understood; it is rather the working-out of possibilities projected in understanding (Heidegger 1927/1962, 188-9).

The development of understanding into interpretation involves a change in mode of engagement.³ With this change in engagement we can now talk
about our action and situation, whereas before any talk was part of that action and situation. Such an account is an interpretation (albeit a preliminary one) because it lays out the organization of events in a way that is more articulated and thematized. Although interpretation is always organized and directed by a preliminary understanding, corrections to this understanding will, indeed must, be made in the course of inquiry.

An understanding of how practical activity provides the basis for interpretation of that activity contributed two things to the investigation of moral conflict. The first contribution was an appreciation of the role of the researcher in traditional forms of psychological inquiry. Heidegger's account carries the implication that our traditional training to be detached and disinterested in our study and analysis of people and their behavior, so far as such a stance is possible at all, provides us with only a distorted kind of understanding. If we are to form psychological theories that do justice to humankind, we must start from our practical understanding of people and practices, the understanding we have by virtue of being members of our society, instead of attempting to be neutral and objective. Heidegger argues that we can make any sense at all of things when we try to become detached only because of this fundamental concerned involvement, this "primordial familiarity" with the world.

The second contribution made to the study of moral conflict by an understanding of the relationship between interpretation and understanding was a perspective on the young adults' interactions, one that I shall expand upon shortly. What was the mode of their engagement in different activities? What kinds of problem, barrier and challenge did their activity run up against, and how and when did they articulate it?

It was possible, for example, to contrast discourse that was part of the activity of seeking retribution after the broken agreement to cooperate:

B:413  LM2  [Interrupting] No! We want... [He raises his index finger, to emphasize his point.]
414   WM2  You want? [His tone is incredulous. WF2 and WM2 laugh.]
415   LM2  No, listen....
416   WM2  [Interrupting] You're not in much of a position to demand... 

... with discourse that talked about engaged activity:

B:1350  LM2  And, once we... And you guys said you weren't out to make money I mean it was this trust thing, but from the very beginning, every time you guys made money and we lost, you guys were real pleased about it.
Even the second example is not of course one of completely disinterested observation; it involves concerns and interests. But at line 413 LM2’s words are an enacted rejection of the other team and a curtailing of intimacy. LM2 looks down on his friends, interrupting them and demanding recompense for the wrong they have done. Concerns over broken trust and deviant responsibility are not talked about, but they clearly organize how LM2 acts and speaks. At line 1350, in contrast, an explicit “issue” is made of the winning team’s glee and hypocrisy; he talks about these as elements of their interaction together that now stand out.

A Starting Place for Interpretation

We have still not yet reached the point where we can begin to interpret the moral conflicts: we need first to reach an appropriate starting place for this interpretive inquiry. Addison and I described in chapter 1 some of the reasons why interpretive inquiry does not try to ensure that knowledge is built upon a “foundation,” but instead places emphasis on recognizing and appropriating a “starting place” for hermeneutic inquiry in practical understanding.

There are two tasks to be carried out in establishing this starting place: “choosing the right entity for our example,” and “working] out the genuine way of access to it” (Heidegger 1927/1962, 26). We must select the text appropriate for our inquiry or, since we are dealing here with interaction rather than a written text, we must fix the pertinent interactions. We shall deal with this selection and fixing first, and then consider how to achieve suitable access.

Selecting and Preparing the Entity for Interpretation. “Choosing the right entity” is the first task in establishing the starting point for an interpretive inquiry. In the case of the moral conflict study this was a matter of selecting a kind of event for detailed study, and then preparing the video-recordings for interpretive analysis by transcribing them.

The tapes were viewed repeatedly with a view to the selection of an analytical focus for the inquiry. It became apparent that in four of the ten sessions a similar kind of occurrence took place: I have already referred to the way that the winning team broke an agreement they had made to cooperate with their friends on the other team. After the two teams had talked together and agreed to act so that both would gain points, the team which had been ahead in points very soon played competitively instead, selecting their move in the game so that their friends lost points. “Burning” was the term used in one session by the victims of this betrayal; I came to adopt it too.

The occurrence of burning seemed to be the “right entity” for several reasons. The burning marked the beginning of conflicts between the teams in which moral concerns were enacted and moral issues raised. And since burning was carried out in four of the sessions it was possible to compare and
contrast the occurrences, and to compare these four occasions with sessions that were similar in several other respects (a difference in points between the teams; an agreement to cooperate) but in which no burning took place.

Preparing Action for Interpretation. Interpretive research does not deal with action as and when it occurs. Social action, like speech (which of course is itself a kind of action) is located at a particular time and place. It is temporally situated and organized, and intimately tied to its location. These essential characteristics raise problems for any systematic study of action: the original temporality and setting are lost to the researcher. But, just as discourse can be recorded as written text ("... words do flye, but writing doth remain" Anglo, 1969, cited in Geertz 1983, 127), action leaves "traces" that can be "fixed" in various ways so that it can be studied. Ricoeur has given the most detailed analysis of the fixation of action:

My claim is that action itself, action as meaningful, may become an object of science, without losing its character of meaningfulness, through a kind of objectification similar to the fixation which occurs in writing (Ricoeur 1979, 81).

Ricoeur discusses the several changes that fixation brings about in action. Changes come about in the act's temporal characteristics, in the relationship of act to agent and of act to recipient, and in the forms of reference and indexicality (more later on this last point). Fixation differs from structuralist abstraction and decontextualization, and the organization of fixed action differs from the purely internal structural relations that constitute a system of competence. In his more recent writing on textuality Ricoeur (1981) emphasizes additional characteristics of narrative texts and of fixed action, in particular the unfolding chronology of plot, which moves from predicament through response to resolution in such a way as to reveal hidden aspects of character and situation.

Fixation can take several forms. In our everyday dealings we fix action in memory, historical records, myths and reputations. Action is often fixed in written narrative accounts, but it can also be fixed by making a video recording. While video taping is often promoted on the grounds that it provides an objective record of events, in actuality social interaction that has been fixed through video taping shows all the characteristics of a text analogue. Taping necessarily transforms the action, rather than neutrally documenting it. First, the tape provides a "record," both visual and auditory, an "inscription" of action, that permits dislodging the action from the time of its production while both preserving and surmounting the temporal organization of sequence and succession. Second, the recorded action retains a meaning that is distinct and detached from both the agent's intention and the recipient's response
at the time. "Our deeds escape us," writes Ricoeur, "and have effects which we did not intend" (1979, 83). Third, recorded action "transcends the social conditions of its production" (1979, 85) in so far as the recording possesses meaning and import for viewers who were not originally present.

I have said that a video recording both preserves and surmounts the original temporal organization of social action. The temporality of fixed action is especially important to interpretive inquiry. Our experience of "live" action is one of projection into a future of necessary and possible alternatives: we get caught up in action, with hopes, fears and concerns about what we can accomplish and what may happen to us, faced with intrinsic uncertainties about outcome. Unanticipated consequences are continually evolving, and novel contingencies must always be dealt with. At the same time we are caught up in customary practices and institutions whose existence seems totally independent of our own. Temporality here has a complex, non-linear character, that Heidegger interpreted as the "meaning" of care and existence: we are "thrown" into a social world, where we "project" ourselves toward our existential possibilities, and either come to understand ourselves authentically or fail to do so.

In contrast, the temporality of action that has been fixed becomes more linear and clear-cut. Once action is fixed we are free to move to and fro within it. When viewed for the first time, a video-recording preserves much of the surprise and discovery that characterized the original action. But on subsequent viewings the sequence of acts and experiences, the episodic dimension of the interaction, starts to seem a configuration with an existence of its own. Just as we can skip forward and back in a narrative account, with a video-recording we can jump to the end to see the outcome, or rewind to review something that is now understood as having a fresh significance. The fast-forward and rewind buttons on any hermeneutic researcher's VCR will be the first to need repair.

This new perspective is both revealing and misleading. We must be careful not to become drunk with our elevated perspective as researchers, able as we are to review the entire progress of an interaction, as though from above it, after it has run its course. This perspective appears a privileged one, but it has its hazards. The shift in perspective is like the difference between reading a new book and writing a review of it after finishing: when the movement from beginning to ending has come to seem inevitable. If we are unaware of the shift it can lead to a misreading of praxis as inevitable process: of spontaneous and creative action as a mere unfolding sequence of events that were laid out in advance. What now may seem to have been a determinate course through the exchange was, at the time, secured from a sweep of possibilities that the young adults found facing them. To lose sight of the ambiguity and open-endedness inherent in their situation is to ignore their creative shaping
of conduct. It is because it attends only to this detached, elevated perspective, intent on removing narrative and action entirely from their context and setting, that structuralist analysis tends to “de-chronologise” both narrative and action, reducing their temporal aspects to underlying formal properties. When we talk, for instance, of conflicts as involving a “process of resolution” we are misled into thinking that appropriate procedures will lead inevitably to a happy outcome. But there are no such guarantees. In practice, from the perspective we have when engaged, we can never be sure whether a conflict will be resolved or not.

A perspective that provides an overview on action has advantages as well as disadvantages. Nagel (1986) argues that the “problem of excess objectivity” is one of false reductions and a refusal to recognize part of what is real. But he also argues (p. 4) that “appearance and perspective are essential parts of what there is, and in some respects they are best understood from a less detached viewpoint.” For interpretive inquiry the danger in fixing action is that we lose sight of the agent’s perspective; we need to find a way of holding onto a temporal perspective akin to that of the engaged agent. We can do this by working to become engaged ourselves in our record of fixed action, be it recording, notes or transcript. We must read it as an unfolding drama, regaining a sense of its openness and surprises. We must hold onto the awareness that we know things the participants did not discover until later, if at all.

A further step of fixation takes place when video-recordings are transcribed. A transcript bears a complex relation to its parent video-tape. Conventional symbols replace audible speech; gestures and movements are ignored or “described” (i.e., interpreted); intonation is lost or categorized (“question,” “command,” “statement”) so as to exclude ambiguity. Detailed phonetic transcriptions try to resist some of these changes but instead produce records that generally resist the reader. There is a temptation to consider a transcript as, again, an objective description, where in actuality it is always a reading.

In the study of moral conflicts my practice was to keep transcription devices to a minimum and to use transcripts primarily to serve as reminders, or mementos, of the video recordings. The audio track of each video-recorded session was dubbed onto an audio-cassette to facilitate repeated rewinding on a transcribing machine, and transcribed. Transcripts ranged in length from 650 to 1700 turns of speech; each was checked for questionable readings, first against the corresponding audio-recording, then against the video-recording. At this time speaker identity was noted on the transcript, along with such information as to whom utterances were directed and non-verbal features such as gestures and movements. Once these tasks had been completed the interpreter had an extensive commonsensical familiarity with the episodes.
The audio-recordings served a further function: they could be replayed in more convenient circumstances than the video tapes could, facilitating recall of what had been seen on the videos. Soon there came a point where, when reading the transcripts, I could hear the manner in which words were exchanged and recall what people were doing as they spoke.

**Securing Access to the Entity.** We can turn now to consider the second task in preparing a starting place for interpretation. This is working out a way of access to the entity we have chosen that seems fitting: securing an appropriate perspective from which to read the text. We are always involved in a hermeneutic circle in so far as a preliminary understanding of the phenomenon provides the terms within which interpretation proceeds, but this circle need not be a vicious one where interpretation is just a restatement of our preconceptions. Heidegger argued that “what is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way” (Heidegger 1927/1962, 195). “We must rather endeavour to leap into the ‘circle’, primordially and wholly” (Heidegger 1927/1962, 363). We can never be sure at the outset that we have found the best access to the circle of understanding and interpretation, and the test of the access we chose will come only as an interpretation is worked out, but we can at least avoid, so far as possible, understanding what we are studying in terms of either subjective fancies or commonly accepted misconceptions.

In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing. To be sure, we genuinely take hold of this possibility only when, in our interpretation, we have understood that our first, last, and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, foresight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves (Heidegger 1927/1962, 195).

A legitimate access to the entity being investigated is one that is worked out by adopting an appropriate perspective, and this can be possible only if we try to identify and escape from common misconceptions and personal prejudices. To repeat, shunning what seem to be misconceptions cannot guarantee that our access is a legitimate one; but if we fail to examine our preconceptions critically our access will almost certainly be inappropriate. Our starting point in the hermeneutic circle should be an informed and aware one, but even so, in the course of interpretation our understanding will most likely require reshaping. The effort to adopt an informed starting point and to keep interpretation open to correction are hermeneutic alternatives to the procedures that supposedly guarantee the validity and reliability of so-called objective measurement in empiricist research.

Adopting an appropriate perspective on the moral conflicts required both negative and positive movements. The negative move was one of recognizing
that I had to consider both behaviorist and cognitive-developmental accounts of moral action and moral development as misconceptions from which it might prove tricky to escape. The task here was to get distance from these, especially the cognitivist position, which for many psychologists has come to seem the commonsensical way of thinking and talking about morality. A struggle was necessary to give an explanatory account that didn’t make reference to schemes and stages, principles, procedures and the other structural and computational terms. It was fortunate that there are articulate and thorough expositions of the cognitive-developmental approach in the writings of Kohlberg, Blasi (1980), Habermas (1979, 1983) and others. To call these works misconceptions is not to say that their proponents are victims of faulty reasoning or poor observation, but that these authors have worked with commitment and consistency within broad metatheoretical frameworks (rationalism, in the case of these three) that, from a Heideggerian perspective, systematically misinterpret the character and relationship of human action and thought.

One way to establish and maintain distance from these two perspectives on moral conflict was to shuttle between them. Merleau-Ponty, who adopts a dialectical tack between formalist and behaviorist philosophy and psychology to great effect in two of his major works (1942/1963; 1945/1962) provided a model here. Shuttling between these two perspectives on the interaction opened up space for a third more appropriate perspective. Consideration of what the conflicts would look like viewed from the traditional perspectives continued throughout the investigation. (Recall that working to get the foreground structures right is “our first, last, and constant task.”)

The positive movement in adopting an appropriate perspective was a matter of struggling to understand, in a preliminary way, what action might be if neither formal nor mechanical. This positive perspective was a matter of reading on the topics of action, rhetoric, and emotion. Heidegger’s analysis of the structures of practical activity, especially his discussion of the three modes of engagement, was the main reading on action (along with Blasi 1980; Habermas 1979; Hampshire 1959; James 1890/1950; Kenny 1963; Locke 1983; Mackenzie 1977; Merleau-Ponty 1945/1962; Mischel, 1974; Searle 1969; Staub 1978; Thalberg 1971; and Weiner 1980). Rhetoric was of interest as the study of ways in which people influence one another; Aristotle’s (1954) analysis of rhetoric (which Heidegger calls “the first systematic hermeneutic of the everydayness of Being with one another,” 1927/1962, 178), along with more recent works on rhetoric (e.g., Booth 1974; Kinnevy 1971) and related work on speech (e.g., Searle 1969). The literature on emotions included de Rivera (1977), along with Heidegger’s analysis of “Befindlichkeit”: the involvement of emotion and mood in understanding, and others (e.g., Arnold 1968; Bailey 1983; Guignon 1984; Hall and Cobey 1976; Hoffman 1979; Hume 1888/1978;

This reading led me to sketch a three-fold perspective on social action: as a mode of engagement in the world; as an influence on others; and as structured by emotion and mood. It also pointed out three cross-cutting interpretive foci: the interpersonal distance or “intimacy” people maintained or changed; individuals’ relative moral “status”; and the “mythology” of what was talked about (this last term was chosen to emphasize that such talk was interpretation, not neutral description).

So the search for the right kind of access to the burning, one that avoided both cognitivist and behaviorist misunderstandings, led to a tripartite perspective from which to consider action: as mode of engagement, as persuasive rhetoric, and as emotion; and to three aspects of action to be examined: intimacy, status, and mythology. Each portion of the sessions, each exchange between the young adults, could be read as an example of a kind of engagement (unreflectively involved, circumspective, detached), as structured by an emotion (e.g., contempt, anger, remorse), and as presenting the world in persuasive terms (e.g., as a competition, as the “trust game,” in phrases of accusation or assuagement). Each portion could also, in a complementary fashion, be seen as bringing about a change in the intimacy and closeness between people; a change in their standing vis a vis each other in credibility, culpability, and capability; and a change in the world they found themselves acting in.

The perspective that provided a starting place for interpretation was made up of three interrelated aspects, selected to complement rather than confuse. To employ a spatial analogy, this was like deliberately viewing a house from several vantages in order to better understand its layout. Separate accounts of an episode given in terms of its intimacy, moral status and mythology would throw light on each other and facilitate articulation and correction. For instance, when the teams in one session distanced each other and continued after the burning to play the “game” only randomly, when they moved far from each other in terms of intimacy but sustained rough equality in status and engaged unreflectively in their joint activity, it was no surprise that they talked of their situation solely in terms of “fun,” unable to give voice to the moral concerns that animated their action. Here intimacy, status, and mythology were interrelated in a manner that seems complex, but becomes clearer when each aspect can be considered in turn, then the three brought together again.

**Interpretation as Articulation**

We have examined the twin preparations for interpretation: choosing the right entity and working out a genuine way of access to it. I have explained
that occasions of burning (together with the context of the events preceding
them and the conflicts following them) were the kind of entity chosen in the
investigation of moral conflict, while access was provided by a three-fold per-
spective on intimacy, status, and mythography. We can now consider how inter-
pretation proceeds from this starting point.

Recall that an interpretive inquiry taps into our engaged practical under-
standing of an entity or phenomenon by adopting what seems an appropriate
perspective. Interpretation is a matter of articulating this anticipatory sketch,
letting an account of the phenomenon emerge gradually and become more
explicit. An interpretive account opens up, lays out and articulates the per-
spective from which an event or interaction has been understood, at the same
time as it puts the perspective to test. When we examine it more closely, this
articulation of practical understanding into a thematic narrative turns out to
have two sides: one negative, the other positive.

The Negative Side of Articulation. Many of the entities and events we
understand in an engaged manner have the peculiar property of “withdraw-
ing” from focal awareness, and this places special difficulties in the way
of interpretation.

The peculiarity of what is proximally ready-to-hand is that, in its readinessto-hand it must, as it were, withdraw in order to be ready-to-hand quite authen-
tically (Heidegger 1927/1962, 99).

Precisely because we are so familiar with everyday phenomena and events,
we are able to take most of what we understand about them for granted.
Because they are familiar and unexceptional we consider them in only a cur-
sory and perfunctory fashion. In our everyday dealings with the world most
of our action is disregarded, ignored and glossed over. The interpretive
researcher’s practical, everyday understanding, although it provides the nec-
essary access from which interpretation proceeds, is an understanding within
which events and entities are “withdrawn.”

How can we make the activities and events of which we have a practical
understanding become more evident and apparent? The negative side of artic-
ulation involves uncovering what has withdrawn by attending to things that
are “conspicuous” (Heidegger 1927/1962, 102) as disturbances. As we try to
interpret a narrative or a fixed interaction we are struck first by oddities,
anomalies, things that don’t make sense. These gaps, barriers, and blocks in
practical understanding can foster interpretation; by focusing on them we
can bring about changes in perspective that can enlarge the scope of our
interpretation. In a disturbance our understanding becomes “lit up” so that
its organization is more apparent. When practical understanding breaks down,
when it meets with interference, with a block or barrier, our engagement in
the world changes to one of circumspection (from the ready-to-hand to the unready-to-hand mode). This brings about transformations in our awareness of ourselves, of our activity, and of the people and setting we are dealing with. Each of these becomes thematized: where previously they formed an opaque totality that was the background or context to our action, now they become laid out with a transparent discernible organization.

The context . . . is lit up, not as something never seen before, but as a totality constantly sighted beforehand in circumspection (Heidegger 1927/1962, 105, original emphasis removed).

Kuhn has elevated this emphasis on attending to disturbances of understanding to the status of hermeneutic maxim: “When reading the works of an important thinker, look first for the apparent absurdities in the text and ask yourself how a sensible person could have written them. When you find an answer, I continue, when those passages make sense, then you may find that more central passages, ones you previously thought you understood, have changed their meaning” (Kuhn 1977, xii).

A central example is provided by the event of burning itself. One motivation, in addition to those already mentioned, for selecting this event as the focus of interpretation was its puzzling character. Who should the participants break their newly made agreement to cooperate? In particular, why should the winning team cheat, since their superiority in points was already assured? The occasion in each session when the burning took place was just after the moment when the theoretically rational solution to the game had been reached. Burning was a course of activity that seemed in direct contradiction with accounts of behavior as rational goal-seeking, or as cognitive appraisal of costs and benefits. At best, one would have to impute goals or benefits whose appearance would be somewhat perverse in what was, as the participants knew, a study of morality. Burning represented, then, a point of breakdown in my own understanding of what went on in the sessions. It also seemed to be an occasion of breakdown in the teams’ interaction together; a disturbance they had to struggle to deal with, and make new sense of.

As a practical disturbance for the participants themselves, the burning opened up a new and perplexing perspective on their interaction together, especially for the losing team. The losing team’s response to the burning showed two new concerns—over trust and responsibility. Their actions suggested they understood the burning as a painful violation of trust, and that they were now confused about the winning team’s responsibility for the burning: what exactly had happened? What had they been trying to do? For example:
As an interpretive disturbance for the investigator, the burning suggested the presence of a way of understanding the competitive game, and a form of engagement between the teams, that had little to do with optimizing winnings. One line of interpretation took the form of an exploration of the winners’ satisfaction at beating the other team even if it meant losing points.

Disturbances in our initial understanding of an interaction are not always occasions of apparent absurdity or puzzlement. A disturbance of understanding can also be something that “stands in the way” of interpretation, something disturbing and offensive. In such a case interpretation meets with resistances and emotional blocks:

That to which our concern refuses to turn, that for which it has ‘no time,’ is something un-ready-to-hand in the manner of what does not belong here, of what has not as yet been attended to. Anything which is un-ready-to-hand in this way is disturbing to us, and enables us to see the obstinacy of that with which we must concern ourselves in the first instance before we do anything else (Heidegger 1927/1962, 103).

Even these blocks can be turned to good purpose and used to foster interpretation. I found myself, for example, avoiding viewing the video of one group’s session (group B); I had “no time” for it. I came to realize that I was disturbed by the cold, controlled contempt and disdain with which one team regarded the other after the burning. The exchange has been cited briefly above:

B:407 LM2 Okay, here, we came up with a new option (since) you guys violated the trust ( ). [Laughter from the other members of both teams.]

409 WM1 What’s your option? Ah, okay, wait ... let me, you wanna ... okay, because you violated our trust on the last option, (but) we’re willing to give you this ...
My first response to this episode was, then, an avoidance of it much as I might avoid someone who expressed contempt toward me. When I came to consider this reaction as a way of understanding the episode I was able to give a preliminary interpretation of the group's interactions, as movements of contempt and disdain. This in turn led to a new and widening interpretive access to the session. An interpreter's emotions must not be shrugged off as a personal and subjective attitude, but acknowledged as a helpful way of understanding an interaction. Details of this understanding may need correcting later, but it provides an essential opening access to the text-analogue.

Heidegger's use in the quotation above of the term "obstinacy" aptly points out the fact that a text or interaction can resist interpretation. Critics of interpretive inquiry sometimes talk as though there are no constraints on subjectivity or whim in interpretation. Phenomenologically this is inaccurate: a text has its own terms, to which one must accommodate if interpretation is to proceed. (See the discussion on validity of interpretation in Seung 1982, 174ff.)

The Positive Side of Articulation. The second side to the articulation by which interpretation proceeds deals with entities of an interaction that are very different from those that withdraw. Consequently this aspect of articulation does not proceed through attending to disturbances. The phenomena that do not withdraw from our awareness in our everyday practical understanding of action are those to which the action makes reference. In everyday activity we have constant dealings with references and signs that show or indicate something to us, or that direct us to do something.

Such phenomena as references, signs [and] significations... let some context of it [the ready-to-hand] become accessible in such a way that our concernful dealings take on an orientation and hold it secure.... [A sign] raises a totality of equipment into our circumspection so that together with it the worldly character of the ready-to-hand announces itself.... Signs always indicate primarily wherein one lives, where one's concern dwells, what sort of involvement there is with something (Heidegger 1927/1962, 110-111).

The scope of reference extends far beyond literal signs. Heidegger talks of "signposts, boundary-stones..., signals, banners, signs of mourning and
the like" (Heidegger 1927/1962, 108), but even this list gives scant attention to reference in social interaction. Virtually all of our everyday action "indexes" its setting, in a manner that exhibits the phenomenon of reference. Indexical expressions are those that refer to the speaker, or to the time or place of utterance. "I am happy" is an indexical expression because the personal pronoun refers to the speaker. "It is not raining" is indexical since its truth value depends on the particular weather conditions at the time and location of utterance. Indexicality is, then, a familiar phenomenon, but its importance and scope are underestimated (Garfinkel 1967). Most significantly, indexing and reference are generally conceived of as involving a formal relationship between signifier and signified, between "thing" and "sentence." But our everyday interactions are indexical in a non-formal way: they continuously point out to others "what we are 'at' at any time," not by being "a Thing which stands to another Thing in the relationship of indicating" (Heidegger 1927/1962, 110), but by raising into our circumspection the kind of involvement we have in a situation. What action points out are not objectively definable objects and features but aspects of context that are constituted by the participants' involvement and concerns.

The speech and action that make up a social interaction continuously index entities and aspects of the setting we are involved in. Understanding what is said and done is in large part a matter of appreciating these entities and aspects. This is not to say that people explicitly talk about such entities and aspects, for it is often the case that concerns and involvements become "lit up" not through what is talked about but through how things are said and done. I mentioned earlier how, after the burning, concerns over trust and responsibility became lit up as acts of withdrawal and derision. Interrupting and demanding pointed out the demeaned position the other party was now in; this was their role in establishing the winning team's new status.

Let's consider a brief exchange to see how aspects of the situation are pointed out and illuminate the kind of situation the participants find themselves in:

A: 522 WFl They're catching up on us.
523 LF1 Well, it's not a contest.
525 WM1 Oh, no, sorry, sorry.
526 LM2 (He wants more money.) [Laughs.]

The phrases "catching up" and "contest" used here reveal one way of understanding what is going on: as a competitive game. Such an understanding would, one presumes, make reference to "winners" and "losers," "strategy"
and "fun," "rivalry" and "struggle." Activity commensurate with this understanding would index certain aspects of the setting: differences in points won, or ways to increase one's own winnings, for instance. At the same time that the winning team talks of catching up, LF1's disavowal of their way of understanding things ("Well, it's not a contest") exposes a divergence between the two teams' concerns and actions. Furthermore, the sarcasm and irony evident in this exchange suggest their conflict is being both enacted and denied. We might say it is enacted by being denied: "... Sorry, sorry" is an apology that cancels itself with irony.

Such interpretations are of course only preliminary; an account of divergent perspectives that lead to a conflict that is denied and covered over can hardly be sustained by a transcript a mere four lines long. In the course of placing this excerpt in its larger context, and comparing events with those of other sessions, such an account must be modified and elaborated. But even so, this brief exchange provides several foci for reading and interpreting the remainder of the session: it draws our attention to words and actions of competition; to differences in the teams' understanding of their common activity; and to the dissembling of hostility. If these are not found elsewhere, our preliminary interpretation needs modification; if they are found, it receives support. And, to reiterate, these interpretive foci are arrived at by attending to what is indexed in the talk between the teams: the elements of their situation to which they orient each other.

I have argued that to the extent we understand a conversation we recognize the kind of situation people are acting in and the concerns and involvements their activities embody. The interpretive focus on "mythology" in the moral conflict study was tied most closely to this phenomenon, since it involved close examination of the terms and expressions used by the young adults. Immediately after the burning, for instance, talk of something "broken" was a common image. Then, in the subsequent phase of accusation, a central issue of "points lost" was an explicit topic of talk between the teams. This provided a clear example of indexicality: the participants talked to one another as though the number of points lost was a simple, objective factual matter. But this was not a simple "fact"; it was the product of a particular, highly evaluative way of viewing the agreement and the betrayal (including seeing it as betrayal). The issue of "points lost" was motivated by, and at the same time served to cover up, the concerns over trust and responsibility, and for this reason I called it a "pseudo-issue" (cf. Packer 1985a). Images ("broken trust") and issues ("You gave us the four you burned us!") pointed to the participants' concerns and involvements, and so these were among those aspects of an interaction the interpreter was first aware of. (We can also see that what is pointed out may be disavowed at other levels of engagement that become evident only as interpretation proceeds.)
Fostering Articulation

Interpretation develops, then, through an articulation that attends to both disturbances of understanding and to reference and indexing. These provide two ways in which what is understood becomes “lit up.” Something along the lines of an “expansion” is going on here, but what is being expanded is not something that lies “behind” the action, as an underlying set of rules or an abstract competence, but instead something “inside” the action (cf. Nussbaum 1986). Here my description of the hermeneutic project diverges from Shweder and Much’s (1987) position that hermeneutics is an unpacking of “propositions” that constitute what is implicit and “unsaid” in speech. This would seem to imply that action embodies knowledge, and so to reintroduce the rationalist assumption that epistemology has priority over ontology; that knowing comes before acting. Interpretation is better viewed, I think, as an articulation of the ends and concerns that action embodies and expresses, of the possible directions a course of activity can take.

Articulation is fostered in several ways. One of these is through writing “simple descriptions” of what is happening. “What are they doing?” is the question guiding such an account. Such a description draws upon the two sides of articulation we have considered: it will include what is pointed out in the action, and it will begin to expose gaps and disturbances in understanding.

Once a simple descriptive account has been made (and often while it is being made) it is possible to ask why things seem as they have been described. Such a question is necessary because we still have only a preliminary and provisional account. How do we know this person was demanding retribution? What does “retribution” mean, anyway? How was the demand made? With such questions we can call a simple description into doubt, forcing ourselves to justify or modify it, and so begin to tie elements of the interaction together and discover their interrelationships.

As an interpretation develops we will need to tolerate and sometimes sustain ambiguity. Parts of the account being written may appear contradictory. This must be acknowledged if we are to avoid premature interpretive closure. Utterances may make little sense when considered individually because at first we lack the familiarity with the whole that confers significance on the parts. The consequence can be a dominating sense of confusion. It is important to respect this sense, and not retreat into reporting only what does make sense. We must proceed with the assumption that the interaction is itself ambiguous and open to different perspectives. If this is so, an account that has room only for what is undeniable and incontrovertible will be limited to the obvious, and will ignore the very openness and uncertainties that make social interaction interesting:
Ambiguity is not a popular topic. Because ambiguity is the very milieu out of which meaning is born, it is one of the antagonists of everyday life. Ambiguity is an openness into which each of us is thrown each time we converse with a stranger. It is the very nature of a conversation to be undetermined at the outset, and as a conversation proceeds, somehow the parties to it begin to take up a position in a world of meanings (Liberman, 1980, 66).

If there is unavoidable ambiguity to a text or text-analogue, there can be no single correct interpretation. A good interpretation will be one that exposes this ambiguity, but no single account can include all the different forms understanding may take. Any text or interaction can be read in a multitude of ways. To give an interpretive account covering all of them would require the impossible task of anticipating all the questions new readers could pose, all the concerns they might bring. The best we can do is grant that a better interpretation is one that uncovers more of the perspectives from which an interaction can be viewed. At no point can an interpretation be fully complete. It always possible that a little more work will uncover a hitherto unsuspected perspective on things. In this way interpretive inquiry resembles the rest of life.

The Outcome of Interpretive Inquiry

What is the outcome of all this? What do we have when our understanding has been developed as an interpretation? The primary outcome of the interpretive study I have been using as an example was an account of one kind of moral conflict: occasions of minor betrayal where people hurt their friends. The interpretation of these conflicts showed that burning was understood as mean-spirited cheating by its victims, while those who did it took it as harmless fun misunderstood. The conflict over burning began to make sense only when I took into account both these ways of understanding it, and so recognized its openness to alternative interpretations.

Phases of Conflict. My interpretation of burning included an account of “phases” to the conflict. Three main phases were distinguished. The first was an initial response to the burning with moral outrage, surprise, and shock. At this point, the losing team members “Don’t know what’s going on!” Engagement with the other team was suspended, and the losing team adopted a moral stance of superiority and indignation as concern over trust and responsibility structured the mode of its engagement.

In the second phase, a heated exchange took place as accounts were given of what had occurred. These accounts were progressively articulated; they developed from global, undifferentiated emotive reports (“screwing off,” “playing around”) to differentiated, relatively articulated statements of the
relevant aspects of the situation. They didn’t, notably, move toward a state-
ment of abstract moral principles; the most fully articulated accounts were
still structured by practical concerns and interests.

Throughout this second phase accounts were given as though they were
objective and incontrovertible descriptions of factual events. Each team took
it for granted that the others understood things as they did themselves. And
talk centered on the pseudo-issue, described above, of how many points were
lost; the moral concerns (trust and responsibility) remained unarticulated.

In the third phase conflict either progressed to further articulation or
else ended in a standoff between the teams. In two of the sessions (B and D)
articulation of accounts developed to a point where the underlying concerns
were addressed and the two teams finally appreciated that they understood
events differently. They came to accept the others’ account as an alternative,
valid perspective on an ambiguous interaction. Accounts of events were now
given in conditional form, and moves were made toward resuming play in
the game.

This has been a much abbreviated version of the narrative account in
which I tried to convey what I found out about burning and, on a bigger
stage, betrayal. The phases were an attempt to represent, to present again,
the dramatic plot of the burning, the circumstances of its occurrence, and its
aftermath. I wanted to show how involvement in joint action gave practical
moral conflict a character unlike that of disengaged reflection on moral issues.

And I wanted to do this in a way that “rang a bell” for the reader. One task
of hermeneutic inquiry is to bring to words experiences we find we have
understood all along but have been unable to give voice to. Experiences of
moral conflict are perhaps particularly likely to have a side that cannot be
spoken but that can be recognized once it is described. Accordingly, another
role for the description of phases of conflict was to uncover aspects of moral
conflict that tend to be covered over. This included aspects of the interaction
among the young adults that were, at least initially, covered up in their con-
licts and it also included, at a more general level, aspects of morality and
moral conflict typically ignored or suppressed in our psychological theories.

Uncovering What Was Covered Over. Three things were covered over in
the conflicts themselves. Each of these three was hidden, at least initially,
because it provided a context or background within which action took place,
and within which the young adults’ interpretations advanced. First were the
concerns that arose in response to the burning: concerns over responsibility
and trust. These concerns were evident to the interpreter as movements organ-
izing action by the losing team in the first phases. But the young people
themselves were not reflectively aware of their own concerns, at least initially,
and didn’t refer to them in their conversation. Only in the final phase of
conflict were the concerns talked about as explicit issues.
A second topic, one that was never talked about explicitly although its influence can be discerned throughout the conflicts, was the friendship among the students. Their friendship provided the ground from which their conflict grew. In a sense, it was friendship that made the burning possible: betrayal can take place only where loyalty and equality have become customary.

The last item whose influence was continual but covert was the task setting in which the young adults were put. The trivial competitive game, and the research environment, placed bounds on the extent to which resolution could be achieved. The two teams became “winners” and “losers” in the game, and this pitted the young people against each other as factions with incompatible goals and viewpoints.

As I suggested, the interpretive account of burning also pointed out several aspects of moral conflict typically covered up in our psychological accounts. First is the part that emotions play in setting up the context within which conflict proceeds. The involvement of emotions is misunderstood if they are considered merely subjective mental states that disrupt or weight moral reasoning and action. Emotions are transformations in social relationships, interpersonal movements (de Rivera 1977), and transmutations of the situation in which action takes place (Hall & Cobey 1976). As such, they provide the grist which any moral deliberation must have to grind upon if it is to lead to action of any consequence. Correlative to this are the limitations inherent in reason as a tool with which to resolve conflict. Reason works with the “facts,” but people who are enmeshed in a moral conflict have divergent understandings of what the facts are.

The third thing covered up in research reports is the genuine ambiguity of conduct and events in an interaction or a relationship. Only when this ambiguity is recognized can we appreciate that there will be at least provisional justification for all parties’ perspectives on a conflict; from a researcher’s perspective there is never an unequivocal indication of who acted properly, or an obvious choice of who gave a correct account of events. We talk of moral dilemmas with good reason: they have two facets, each of which has a claim to validity. Contrary to claims by cognitive-developmentalists (e.g., Kohlberg, Levine and Hewer 1983, 49), there appears to be little justification for maintaining that advanced moral functioning permits facile resolution of such dilemmas.

The final aspect of moral conflict whose importance and influence has been minimized is the engaged, temporalized perspective that participants have on their own action, and which was discussed above. The objective, detached perspective that has been lauded as morally superior is in actuality a “view from nowhere” (Nagel 1986) that is powerless unless informed by an involved, engaged viewpoint.
Anomalies and Reinterpretations

In the concluding section of this book Richard Addison and I entertain the notion that accounts of interpretive research should report anomalies and flaws in an interpretation, and point out what remains incomprehensible. I want briefly to address some doubts of my own. First, the situation I studied was an artificial one, raising questions about the typicality of these conflicts. Use of analogue tasks in moral development research stems in part from the ethical and practical problems of studying real-life conflicts, but also in part from a deep-rooted assumption that we must control and manipulate people in order to explain what they do. So I am sympathetic with those (e.g., Barratt & Sloan 1988, Danner 1986) who consider the conflicts I was able to study trivial ones (cf. Packer 1988). But I also think that one strength of this research was demonstrating that even "planned" conflicts are not as rational as we might assume. Real-life moral conflicts are quite likely to show characteristics like those I have described.

Second, alternative interpretations of the motivation of burning have been proposed to me. One is that the winning team was able to indulge in a hostile and aggressive act because it was excused by the simulated game setting and they knew it would be controlled by the experimental situation. A second interpretation is that the winning team knew the burning was harmful but saw harm-doing as an inherent part of competition. Their pleasure came not from the pain they inflicted, but from the increased intimacy and cohesion within their team that came with achieving the status of "winners." Each of these accounts could be compared with my own, and its merit and demerits assessed.

Third, I think that I confused and confounded two different kinds of withdrawal. The first is the withdrawal from ongoing projects that induces the detachment of deliberation (and, if the withdrawal is thorough, of abstract reflection). This withdrawal involves a shift from the ready-to-hand mode of engagement to the unready-to-hand mode (and sometimes to the present-at-hand). The second kind of withdrawal is a rejection of others and a backing away from them, as the losing team does when it is burned. I interpreted the losing team's move of withdrawal as leading to a breakdown in the game that led to deliberation on what had happened. It seemed to me that this deliberation in turn fostered the articulation necessary for the conflict to be resolved. But the teams' argument may have accomplished something else: a decline in the withdrawal and rejection. De Rivera (1986) proposes that the conflict was the result of continuing fear and distrust between the teams, and that trust and acceptance, not disengagement, are the precondition of conflict's end. My tendency not to discriminate between disengagement and rejection is also reflected in the fact that although the fore-structure I developed included
de Rivera's "intimacy" and "status" movements, I found no place for his third kind of movement, namely "acceptance" (whose counterpart is "rejection"). In my current research I am careful to attend to all three kinds of movement.

Conclusions

It was no accident that the topic and method of this inquiry were conjoined: that this was a hermeneutic study of moral conflict. Ethical issues are in several respects closely tied to interpretive inquiry, and I want to conclude with a brief examination of their connection. First, interpretive inquiry denies that facts and values can be clearly distinguished and that only the former are worthy of or amenable to scientific study (the familiar position taken by positivism). Evaluations can be, and often are, validly based on assessments of circumstances that positivism would consider factual. Furthermore, the hermeneutic perspective has ethical implications; a partial appreciation of these is the reason hermeneutics is often erroneously associated with a relativist ethics. These ethical implications go beyond the scope of this chapter.

Next, the goal to which interpretive inquiry is ultimately directed is not just one of mirroring reality in a descriptive account, but of changing it for the better in some way. Hermeneutic research is tied to an appreciation that a "better" account is one that at the very least fosters our understanding and clarifies our action. This kind of inquiry, I believe, does not simply provide means to realize ends whose selection lies elsewhere (the technical conception of science), but instead calls for a clarification of ends and values and a recognition that they are often in competition. My study of moral conflict included no effort to communicate the products of interpretation to the young adults, though such a component might well have been an improvement. Lather (1986) discusses some of the complex implications of this aspect of interpretive inquiry.

The final tie between interpretive inquiry and morality is a fundamental one: that any systematic inquiry is an attempt to answer the question "Why?" Why did the conflicts among the young adults take the form they did? We are accustomed to trying to answer this question in causal or formal terms, with expressions of either mechanical or logical necessity, but in human affairs the question often has a moral force. The question itself generally has a moral tone, since the things that we question are those that shock us, and the answer has a moral quality because courses of action involve an understanding of what is right and wrong, and emotions of shame, guilt, or pride. If this is so, then interpretive inquiry will uncover the various moral concerns that run through our relationships with one another, and will provide forms of explanation that make reference to cultural and practical values.
Notes and References


Chapter 3

Notes

1. Dr. Norma Haan generously made available to me these video recordings, which she made during a study concerning her interactional theory of morality (cf. Haan, Aerts & Cooper 1985).

2. I am aware of the possibility that quoting Heidegger may puzzle as much as it clarifies a point. I do so with the intention of providing a modicum of assistance to the reader who wishes to refer to Being and Time.

3. I have described elsewhere the three modes of engagement that Heidegger distinguishes: the ready-to-hand, unready-to-hand, and present-at-hand modes (Packer 1985c). These are modes respectively of engaged activity, deliberation on a practical difficulty, and disengaged reflection.

4. Here the initial capital letter indicates the session, and the number is the transcript line number. The speaker is indicated with a three-character code: L indicates a member of the losing team, W a member of the winning team; F indicates female, M male; 1 and 2 indicate which of the two team-members of each gender was speaking. So LF1 is the first female member of the losing team. Brackets provide contextual information; parentheses indicate unclear and inaudible speech.

5. For more detail on the fore-structures of interpretation the reader is referred to Addison (this volume), to Dreyfus (in press) and Caputo (1987 p. 70).

6. In the project “Social entry and rejection among preschool children,” funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, Prevention Research Branch.

References

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