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Action Theory, Practical Rationality, and Interpretation

This article explores the possibilities of evaluating interpretations that belong to different ›schools of interpretation‹ by means of a single shared standard. Such a standard becomes available once interpretation is described as a critical *activity*, that is, as something that we *do*. Accordingly, we describe critical activities in terms of categories taken from the theory of action. A basic action lends itself to a reason explanation. Such an explanation specifies both the goals of the agent and the means he employs for attaining them. It thereby reflects his preferences and beliefs that constitute his reasons for goal-directed action. On this descriptive basis we turn to the evaluation of interpretive activities. The theory of practical reasoning has developed a number of ways for criticizing an agent's beliefs and preferences which can be transferred to the evaluation of acts of interpretation. Thus an agent's beliefs are open to a straightforward epistemic criticism while his preferences can be criticized with reference to their epistemic basis, formal structure, and on ›substantial‹ grounds. We suggest that this approach to the evaluation of interpretation combines a number of advantages: First, by operating in the realm of practical rationality (as opposed to theoretical rationality), the approach avoids the thorny questions involved in settling the question of whether interpretive claims can be true or false. Second, it emphasizes the importance of an interpreter's preferences which have been neglected in most previous accounts. Third, our approach operates on a purely formal level and does not make recourse to the aims and subject matter of particular schools of interpretation. Therefore, it might be acceptable for those theoretical schools that are notorious for rejecting the idea of a methodologically guided approach to interpretation. Fourth, it suggests a meta-critical program for analyzing and evaluating interpretations, that it is hoped, can easily be put into practice.

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