

The ethics of changing others' minds (summary)

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Abstract

That we try to persuade each other of what we believe to be true and good is a commonplace and often beneficial part of social life. More so, some situations are inherently about and for persuasion. When we attend a lecture or read a newspaper comment, we at least accept the risk of having our minds changed, and we often want just that, in that we want to learn something. The same applies to guided heritage tours. Still, heritage interpreters, like teachers or journalists, find themselves in a position of special trust and hence special responsibility. If they use it to challenge and influence their audience's habits of mind, they have a moral obligation to make their agenda transparent and be prepared to support it with arguments, not just appeals or suggestive storytelling.

Keywords

persuasion, ethics of interpretation, good practice, Socratic method

Introduction

It is quite literally the job of heritage interpreters to help their audiences make sense of the world and our place in it, at least as reflected in the piece of the world they happen to be interpreting. In other words, interpreters have a platform, and many of them feel that they should use it to encourage sustainable behaviour. Depending on the audience, this may require no more than affirming, in passing, what people already believe and practise. In other cases, encouraging sustainable behaviour may require an interpreter to "challenge mindsets", as the theme of this conference asks us to consider. Between particular habits and comprehensive mindsets, which combine worldviews, ethics, politics, and more, there extends a wide field of topics, large and small, on which interpreters may want to change others' minds.

I condense the subject matter of this paper by using the phrase "to change someone's mind" as a general term covering topics of all sizes as well as various degrees of intended influence. Of course, raising a question is not the same as brainwashing an audience. Arguably, however, in the context of a conference that introduces its theme by stating that "radical shifts in our way of life are needed", it is clearly implied that even polite challenges and open-ended discussion serve the ultimate purpose of making people "more mindful towards our common future" and encouraging them to "transition towards a sustainable lifestyle" (Interpret Europe 2023).

(I bracket here the question how effective changing people's minds can be as an approach to changing behaviour. I tend to agree with David Uzzel (and Karl Marx) that on a societal scale it is often more effective to change behaviour first – by changing the material, economic and legal conditions within which people make their lives. Minds will follow. Then again, it is easier for governments to implement

such lifestyle-changing policies if the dominant cultural values or mindset supports them. And of course, however effective as a point of leverage, people's minds are usually all that interpreters get to work on.)

Is it okay for heritage interpreters to try and influence people's behaviour by changing their minds? After all, this could be seen as adding an undue moral and political agenda to interpretation, among other conceivable objections.

I consider this question from an ethical point of view, as outlined by Anthony Weston's useful textbook definition: "To think or act ethically is to take care for the basic needs and legitimate expectations of others as well as our own." (Weston 2013:5)

For our present purposes, keep in mind the following questions: Who are the others that interpreters should take care for? What legitimate expectations should interpreters strive to meet? And how should their own needs, hopes, and desires influence their decisions in a professional context?

The situation

The first step of an ethical assessment should be to understand the situation (cf. Bleisch et al. 2021). Here, I'm considering not a concrete, individual case but a generalised type of situation, the one heritage interpreters find themselves in when doing their job. Stakeholders are the persons (or, more generally, beings, depending on your ethical outlook) who could be affected by the interpreter's actions. In other words, they include the interpreter themselves and relevant "others" in Weston's sense. The most obvious stakeholders are probably the interpreter's immediate audience, such as a group of people taking a guided tour around a heritage site or the visitors of a related exhibition or website.

In addition, recall what sustainable development means and why someone would consider using their platform as an interpreter to change people's behaviour. This should make it clear that the stakeholders also include everyone in the world who could be affected by any actual changes in the behaviour of audience members. These indirect stakeholders range from immediate associates of a person who tries to live more sustainably today to everyone whose chances for a good life in the future, say in 30 or 100 years, stand or fall with the cumulative effects of such individual efforts.

At the same time, as the horizon of this ethical decision-making situation expands, the causal link between the effect any individual interpreter has on their audience and future states of the world quickly blurs and disappears. This means that an interpreter cannot be sure what good, if any, their sustainable-development messaging does. At the same time, if they deliver a bad interpretation experience or otherwise wrong their audience in the process, the moral damage will be quite concrete and immediate. This makes it hard to use our shared responsibility to future people as a blanket justification.

Changing minds is okay ...

As this conference has taught me, when I ask how heritage interpreters should interact with their audience, I have already answered another contested question: Should there be professional interpreters in something like the traditional sense at all, instead of everyone doing interpretation by and for themselves? As will become clearer below, I think there is much to be said for professional interpreters who challenge people's interpretations with well-informed questions *and* alternatives. In their respective talks and responses at this conference, Patrick Lehes and others have argued for and about this with reasons arising from research-based theories and extensive practical experience. For my present purposes,

however, I think I get can get away with an argument by analogy.

Recall our moral question: Is it okay for heritage interpreters to try and influence people's behaviour by changing their minds? If you think heritage institutions and professionals should avoid offering a specific interpretation of heritage, it is only consistent to reject the even more intrusive idea of using interpretation to influence behaviour. The organisers' call for contributions to this conference had expressed such qualms by suggesting that we need to think about "ethical issues that might arise when considering how to influence people's mindsets, which approaches are acceptable and which are not" (Interpret Europe 2023). In comparison, the audience at my talk, or at least its vocal members, seemed quite nonchalant about instrumentalising their professional role for the worthy cause of sustainable development.

My answer mirrors this situation in that it has two corresponding parts. Firstly, heritage interpreters belong in a category of professionals that also includes teachers, journalists, or artists. These professions are united by the fact that it is part of their job to challenge what people believe and try to change their minds if necessary, including by making them see the world in new ways that may change their lives. This grouping of professions makes sense despite the fact that our legitimate expectations towards teachers, journalists, and artists differ widely in other ways. With teachers and journalists, heritage interpreters share a responsibility to be truthful when reporting facts, and transparent about the way they interpret them. The example of artists of all kinds goes on to highlight that 'we', or at least a majority of the population in liberal democratic societies, positively revel in exchanges of diverse interpretations of the world and of what is important in life. Therefore, as a principle, if the typical work of teachers, journalists, and artists

is morally permissible, then so must be the transparent attempt of heritage interpreters to educate their audience on sustainable development.

Secondly, however, just as for other professions, the freedoms and powers of heritage interpreters come with related responsibilities and pitfalls.

... except when it's not okay

Among the moral pitfalls that heritage interpreters should be aware of as part of their general professional ethic (as I imagine it), it is moralising, manipulation, and lying or warping the truth that seem most relevant to our present discussion. These terms may sound a bit extreme, and you didn't need me to remind you that you shouldn't lie. But keep in mind that each of these failings comes as a gradual scale of moral shadiness rather than a singular type of bad action. The question you should ask is, how does the way I interact with my audience rate on each of these scales (among others)? Be careful to keep the overall shadiness down as much as possible.

Moralising. As someone who teaches ethics in the context of nature conservation and sustainable development, I have often found myself in the position of telling (prospective) professionals that they should ask moral questions where they may think they're just doing their job, and use moral reasoning to figure out what is right. It amounts to teaching people to see moral problems potentially everywhere, and it is what I've been doing here. However, over the years, I've come to appreciate that this extension of moral concern can itself be harmful and requires a balancing awareness – against moralism (Taylor 2012). Imagine a religious or political fanatic who insists on pressing their particular beliefs on you at every turn of a conversation. Don't be that person. While offering some moral perspective and

discussion can be a legitimate and valuable part of the heritage interpreter's role (see above), not every piece of information, topic, or situation calls for moral judgment and messaging, including in terms of sustainable development.

Manipulation. While moralistic appeals may cross a line, they are at least easy to spot, enabling the audience to disregard them if they want to. Manipulation relies on influencing people without them having a clear idea of what is going on. Unfortunately, you may slip into manipulation in the very attempt of avoiding open moralising. For example, some participants at my talk mentioned how they select and arrange information so that their audiences will arrive at certain conclusions by themselves. Depending on details and degree, this can be just good teaching, or it can be a morally dubious alternative to making your message transparent.

Lying and warping the truth. Further down the slippery slope of manipulation, telling the truth selectively may turn into changing it to fit one's story and then into outright lying – all for the good cause, supposedly. Beware of the danger.

Good practice

If you do decide to promote sustainable behaviour in your heritage interpretation, the following principles can help you do it responsibly.

Be transparent. If people come to you to learn about heritage and you frame the factual information in a certain way or add a message, tell your audience what you're doing. This way, you give them a fair chance to decode what you tell them, to object, or to walk away.

Maintain reasonable proportions (or, Don't overdo it). Perhaps needless to say, heritage interpretation should focus on the heritage, lest it turn into an exercise in Education for

Sustainable Development that the audience didn't ask for. If people actually visit a heritage site to learn about it, don't get in their way.

Keep the conversation open. Even if you send a strong message, make sure to invite questions and objections and respond to them fairly. Don't lecture, but offer a conversation.

Know your claims and arguments. Like all learning experiences, heritage interpretation works with emotions, and it may involve various styles and devices of communication including storytelling, jokes, suggestive audiovisuals, and the design of visitor environments. Such a mix of media can help avoid lecturing and make space for different voices and interpretations. However, when you claim a fact, you should be able to support this claim with evidence. In the same way, when you try to convince people that they should act differently, you should be prepared to back this up not just with stories or emotional appeals, but with clear arguments. Do you know what you claim when you try to turn people's minds towards sustainable living, and do you have good arguments to support your case? (The audience at my talk seemed rather fuzzy on this.)

Respect dissent. Some people may reject even your best arguments. Some may make alternative claims that you think are false. Respect their freedom to disagree with you while making it clear that you disagree with them. Then continue the conversation with the whole audience.

Conclusion: Philosophy over rhetoric

The sets of principles and moral pitfalls in the previous sections are ad-hoc proposals meant to set us thinking. I came up with them based on the idea that interpreting with the goal of changing people's minds is a form of persuasion (cf. Kastely 2022 on the ethics of persuasion). I make no attempt here to explore how they

relate to the larger conversation about good practice in heritage interpretation (for recent contributions see TEHIC n. d., UNESCO 2022, Interpret Europe 2020). Judging from the reports of UNESCO's new International Centre for the Interpretation and Presentation of World Heritage Sites (e.g., UNESCO WHIPIC 2023), the global community of professionals and researchers recognises various ethical issues in their field of practice. However, as far as I'm aware, a coherent ethics of heritage interpretation that could inform good practice remains to be spelled out. Let my talk serve to underline that this could be a worthwhile project.

I came to this conference as an environmental philosopher newly working on the relationship between arts/design/culture and sustainable development (under a European project called The Big Green,¹³ with partners including Interpret Europe). It was my first immersion in the professional community of heritage interpretation, but I immediately felt at home. One reason is that I began my own career as a volunteer at a national park – or, as I now know to say, in the field of natural heritage conservation and interpretation – and still hope to return to that kind of work. The other reason is that the more examples I saw of what interpreters do, the more familiar it seemed. While I've usually taught environmental philosophy in a classroom, I know that some colleagues offer philosophical walks and other forms of outdoor philosophy, open to everyone. To bring the similarities to a head, environmental philosophy as a whole can be described as an effort to *interpret* the relationship between humans and their natural heritage. If this seems plausible, then consider the flipside: Heritage interpreters, whose job is routinely defined as facilitating a "meaning-making" process (e.g., UNESCO WHIPIC 2023: 8;

Tilkin 2016: 7), always-already find themselves in the role of philosophers, for better or worse.

With this in mind, I may be professionally biased in making the following final point. It has been a long time coming, ever since Plato wrote the dialogue known as *Gorgias* around 380 BCE. In it, the founding figure of Western philosophy, Socrates, argues with a professional speaker, Gorgias, and some of his colleagues about the nature and worth of rhetoric. Socrates criticises rhetoric as an "artificer of persuasion, having this and no other business", a mere "knack" for producing a desired effect on the minds of the audience. Against it, he sets his own style of conversation, which has come to define philosophy and, by extension, the ideal of the sciences, informing modern expectations towards good communication in general. At its best, a Socratic, philosophical conversation uses questioning and reasoning to discover the truth (as Socrates puts it), as a team, in an open-ended way, without a foregone conclusion.

Heritage interpreters face the same choice, or rather they need to strike a good balance between persuading their audience of what they believe is right and keeping the conversation open. When in doubt, I hope you will choose philosophy.

¹³ <https://thebiggreen.philippthapa.me>

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