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## TRUE INTERPRETATIONS

Stephen Davies, Philosophy, University of Auckland

**Important note:** This is a final draft and differs from the definitive version, which is published in **Philosophy and Literature**, 12 (1988): 290-297. I have been assured by the University of Auckland's research office that if they have made this publicly available then it does not violate the publisher's copyright rules.

"True Interpretations"

Could conflicting interpretations of a literary work be equally true? Both Monroe C. Beardsley and Joseph Margolis assumed this to be impossible in their famous debate about the relationship between the multiplicity of interpretations of literary works and the assessment of such interpretations for truth.<sup>1</sup> The assumption was implicit in the first premise of the following argument. Although they disagreed about the argument's soundness, they did agree about the truth of this premise. The argument, which I examine in detail below, goes like this:

(1) No work of literature can be interpreted truly both as  $p$  and not- $p$  (nor as both  $p$  and  $q$  where  $p$  and  $q$  are contraries).

(2) Many a work of literature admits of equally plausible/convincing/revealing but contradictory or contrary interpretations; so

(3) Interpretations of works of literature cannot be assessed for truth (and nor can they be assessed for falsity).

This argument is an important one for, if it is accepted, it entails that literary criticism and analysis is not deductively based. The use of deduction in practical (as opposed merely to formal) reasoning is possible only where the premises and conclusion might be assessed for truth.

Margolis accepts the soundness of this argument, but Beardsley does not. Both accept that the premises of the argument are true. Because Beardsley believes that the conclusion is false, he

## TRUE INTERPRETATIONS

believes that the argument must be invalid. (Beardsley thinks that the appropriate conclusion to draw is that sometimes we cannot discover which of several conflicting interpretations is the true and correct reading.) Margolis believes that the argument is valid and, hence, that the conclusion is proved. The disagreement between them centers on the role of the second premise in generating the conclusion.

Beardsley argues that the only test for "plausibility" or "convincingness" or "revealingness" is truth. How could an interpretation be plausible except by being plausibly true? On the (inadequate) evidence available, two interpretations might be equally plausible, but that is to say that, on the given evidence, their truth is equally probable. This means only that there is no way of settling which of them is true and that, under the condition of ignorance which maintains, we are in no position to judge which of them is true. It does not show that interpretations cannot be assessed for truth, although it does show that the matter of their truth might not be satisfactorily determinable. So, according to Beardsley, the conclusion does not follow from the premises: "I hold that all of the literary interpretations that deserve the name obey [the principle of 'the Intolerability of Incompatibles']". But of course I do not wish to deny that there are cases of ambiguity where no interpretation can be established over its rivals; nor do I wish to deny that there are many cases where we cannot be sure that we have the correct interpretation."<sup>2</sup>

Margolis's reply might be developed as follows: Where two interpretations are equally consistent with the text, it would make sense to claim that one of them is true and the other false only if there might be some further evidence, as yet unconsidered, which could settle the matter. But, in the case of many conflicting and equally plausible interpretations of literary works, all the evidence that there could be is in; there is no further (hidden) evidence to be appealed to. So there is no truth of the matter. The judgment that the interpretations are equally plausible is not equivalent to a decision to suspend judgment for the lack of decisive evidence, but, rather, a recognition that all the relevant evidence underdetermines questions of truth. Thus, there can be no right, no true, interpretation and, accordingly, in being tested for revealingness or whatever, interpretations are not being tested for truth. Margolis concludes:

## TRUE INTERPRETATIONS

"The relativistic theory of interpretation is sometimes resisted because one wishes to avoid the somewhat unfortunate habit of speaking of art's being inherently incomplete or defective and awaiting the interpretive critic's contribution in order actually to finish the work. What is initially defective or incomplete, of course, is our understanding, not the work; but the nature of the defect is such that, for conceptual reasons, we cannot be certain that what is supplied by way of interpretation is really in principle descriptively available in the work itself - on the basis of any familiar perceptual or perception-like model, which after all offers us the best prospect of the requisite control. One can expect, therefore, a certain conceptual congruence between the theory of art and the latitude tolerated in the practice of critical interpretation."<sup>3</sup>

Someone who believed, for example, that the only plausible interpretation of a novel was the one intended by the author might dispute Margolis's claims. Evidence of authorial intentions is not always apparent in the text of the work and independent sources of evidence for those intentions might not be accessible. In reply, Margolis might reasonably argue that, while a knowledge of authors' intentions often is important in directing us to worthwhile interpretations of their works, our interest in literature does not presuppose that such intentions determine that which we must understand when we appreciate their works. So, where evidence of such intentions comes to light, its discovery cannot serve to discriminate between two equally plausible interpretations (although it might point to the possibility of a third, yet more convincing, interpretation).

(Note that this line of objection to Margolis's view cannot be available to Beardsley who has consistently held that only that which is present in the text can be relevant to its appreciation. Beardsley must accept, if anyone does, that all the evidence relevant to the assessment of an interpretation is publicly available within the work itself.)

As they stand, I find both Beardsley's and Margolis's arguments convincing. Later I shall return to a discussion of these arguments with the aim of effecting a reconciliation between them.

## TRUE INTERPRETATIONS

Before that, though, it is worth considering more closely the truth of the two premises of the argument.

The first premise: No literary work can be interpreted truly as both  $p$  and  $q$  where  $p$  and  $q$  are contraries.

Both Beardsley and Margolis accept the truth of the first premise; are they right to do so? It is sometimes said of Hegelians and para-consistent logicians that they believe that there can be true contradictions (in this world). Whether they would regard the first premise of this argument as false I do not know. For the moment, though, I shall put aside the suggestion that contradictory or contrary interpretations of literary works might both be true.

But one point is worth making: whether or not there can be true contradictions in this world, literary works sometimes create fictional worlds in which contradictions are true. For example, a logically impossible world might be described in which it is both true and not true that a time-traveller kills the baby who would otherwise grow into his father. (Escher's drawings provide some striking examples, in a different artform, of the representation of logically impossible worlds.) More prosaically, many literary works contain inconsistencies - for example, in the Sherlock Holmes stories Watson's war wound "migrates" about his body. So it is true in those stories that Watson was wounded in the thigh and that he was not wounded in the thigh. Cases such as these seem to create the possibility of a challenge to the argument's first premise. But clearly such a challenge is so feeble a one as to leave untouched the central cases in contention.

The second premise: Many a literary work admits of equally plausible but contrary interpretations.

Notice that, as I have set out the dispute between Margolis and Beardsley, Beardsley concedes the truth of the second premise and concentrates on denying that, in conjunction with the first premise, it entails the conclusion. But one might question the truth of the second premise, arguing that the appearance that the same work

## TRUE INTERPRETATIONS

is subject to equally plausible, contrary interpretations is illusory. One way of developing this attack on the truth of the second premise is by arguing either that the work is ambiguous or that it is different "objects" which are being interpreted. There would be no problem (and no argument, of course) if it were always the case that differing interpretations pointed up ambiguities within a work; nor would there be a problem if the focus of critical attention fell on differing aesthetic objects each of which happens to be embodied in the same material object.<sup>4</sup> In neither case would the differing interpretations clash. There is no difficulty in holding that something which is ambiguous allows for contrary interpretations, each of which emphasizes one of the ambiguous elements; and nor is there a difficulty in conceding that different things admit of true but contrasting interpretations.

Four arguments might be pressed into the service of this challenge to the truth of the second premise:

(1) A literary work might be viewable under more than one aspect while providing no indication of which aspect it is properly to be viewed under. Obviously this can lead to contrary interpretations - for example, that Hamlet hesitates weakly when action is possible, or that he acts as decisively as is allowed by his circumstances.

(2) A literary work might be equally classifiable as falling within any one of several different genres. Aesthetic properties very often are genre-specific - that which is highly expressive in a Realistic novel might be expressively neutral in a Gothic novel. So contrary interpretations might easily arise from differing classifications of a work's genre.

(3) Many of the aesthetic properties of a work depend directly upon the intentional use of elements - allusion, irony, metaphorical content, allegory etc. Sometimes it will not be known whether or not the author had the appropriate intentions and differing views on this matter will give rise to contrary interpretations. Moreover, sometimes it will be the case that the intentions are supplied by the work's interpreter (for example, where a poem is read as alluding to a text or event which postdated its creation), in which case it is no longer the author's poem which is being interpreted. Again, conflicting interpretations are a likely result.

## TRUE INTERPRETATIONS

(4) In the case of the performing arts, different (but equally faithful) performances or productions of a single work might present that work as having contrasting aesthetic properties. In one production Hamlet might be played as verging on madness, and in another as craftily feigning distraction.

In each of these cases apparently contrary interpretations arise in one or both of two ways. Either the work is ambiguous in that it is unclear which of two or more readings was intended - in which case the true description of the work is neither as  $p$  nor as  $q$ , but as  $p$  or  $q$  but not both. Or, strictly speaking, the apparently contrary interpretations do not confront each other directly because they are interpretations of different things - either different aesthetic objects as underdetermined by the work, or different works embodied in materially indiscernible objects. Either way, the appearance of contradiction is merely apparent.

Now, the points made above are reasonable ones and surely show that the appearance of conflict between differing interpretations is illusory in many cases. But can we dismiss all conflicts between interpretations as merely apparent in this way? I doubt it. Many conflicting and equally plausible interpretations do seem to be interpretations of the same work (or character within it, or aspect of it, or performance of it, and so on). That is, the difference between such interpretations does not arise in any way from a disagreement about the classification or description of the object of interpretation, but resides, instead, in the way in which the significance of that object is characterized. And often it seems to be the case that such contradictory or contrary interpretations are equally plausible not merely for the want of access to some decisive bit of evidence, but despite the fact that all the evidence is in.

Earlier I wrote that I found both Beardsley's and Margolis's arguments plausible. I agree with Beardsley that, ultimately, there is a connection between assessing descriptions or interpretations for plausibility, convincingness, revealingness, etc., and assessing them for truth. But I do not agree that contrary interpretations might be equally plausible only because, while one of them is true and the other

## TRUE INTERPRETATIONS

false, we lack the evidence which would allow us to determine which is which. So, while I agree with Beardsley's general point, I believe that his attack on the validity of the argument in questions fails because I agree with Margolis's counter to that attack. But on the other hand, I do not agree with Margolis that the conclusion of the argument is proved.

In fact, it seems to me that there is an important sense in which Beardsley's and Margolis's points miss each other. They are unaware of this because they share an assumption which I wish to reject. As I mentioned at the outset, that assumption is implicit in the argument's first premise. In rejecting the assumption I shall argue that the first premise is false and, hence, that the conclusion is unproved. The assumption which they share is this: (A) If any interpretation of a work can be true, then only one interpretation of it can be true. Because Beardsley accepts (A) and that interpretations are to be assessed for truth, he also believes that only one of two plausible interpretations can be correct. On the other hand, because Margolis accepts (A) and that there might be no way of determining which of two interpretations is correct, he accepts the conclusion that, in being assessed for plausibility, interpretations are not being assessed for truth.

(The assumption is a common one. Richard Shusterman, for example, makes it in holding that someone who believes that interpretations are descriptive - and not, for example, disguisedly prescriptive - will believe that they can be assessed for truth only if that person is an "absolutist" in holding that only one interpretation can be correct.<sup>5</sup>)

If our interest in a literary work were an interest in the meaning which it has, only one interpretation of it could be true. Although differing descriptions might be equally successful in capturing that truth, those descriptions could not be contradictory or contrary. But, I maintain, that is the nature neither of our interest in literature nor of our interest in art in general. Rather, we are interested in discovering the meanings which can be put upon a literary work.<sup>6</sup> It is in just this sense that a work underdetermines its interpretations. And it can be true that this meaning can be put upon it and also be true



## TRUE INTERPRETATIONS

that that meaning can be put upon it, despite the fact that this meaning and that meaning are contradictory or contraries. If our interest in literature were like an interest in the utterer's-occasion-meaning of an utterance (to use Grice's term), then there would be only one correct interpretation of a work's significance. But, rather, our interest in works of art is like our interest in the timeless-word-meaning of an utterance - like an interest in the meanings which can be put upon that utterance without regard to its use on any particular occasion of utterance. Because a sentence need have no single timeless-word-meaning, it can be true both that it means p and that it means q where p and q are contradictory or contrary. And this is not to say that what is really true is that it is ambiguous in meaning p or q; rather it is to say that it means both p and q. A disjunction expresses ambiguity only where it is an exclusive disjunction. Whereas any disjunctive account of the multiplicity of timeless-word-meanings of an utterance must characterize the disjunction as inclusive - the utterance means p or q or both.

For this reason I see no difficulty in rejecting the first premise of the argument as false and its conclusion as thereby unproved. In fact, I regard the conclusion not only as unproved, but also as false. On my view, what is true is that equally plausible, contrary interpretations are equally plausible insofar as they are equally true.

University of Auckland,

## NOTES

1. For Beardsley's position see *The Possibility of Criticism*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970). 'The Testability of an Interpretation', is reprinted from the above in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, ed. J. Margolis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978, pp.

## TRUE INTERPRETATIONS

37-86). For Margolis's view see *The Language of Art and Art Criticism*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1965), 'Robust Relativism', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 35 (1976): 37-46 (and reprinted in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, pp. 387-401) and chapters six and seven of *Art and Philosophy*, (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1980). Margolis's position has been discussed by, amongst others, Annette Barnes in 'Half an Hour Before Breakfast', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 34 (1976): 261-271, and by David Novitz in 'Towards a Robust Realism', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 41 (1982): 171-185. See also Denis Dutton's 'Plausibility and Aesthetic Appreciation', *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 7 (1977): 327-340.

2. Beardsley, *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, p.374 - his italics.

3 Margolis, *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, his italics, p.398.

4. I have in mind the type of case most graphically illustrated by the coincidence in text of Cervantes' and Pierre Menard's *Don Quixote*. Here (in Borges' story), Menard's and Cervantes' texts are word-for-word identical and yet each is a distinct work and the one possesses aesthetic properties not displayed by the other. (For discussion of relevant issues see Danto and see David Carrier's 'Art Without Its Artists' on the dispute between Goodman and Wollheim.) However, the important point is that this type of case arises frequently (and prosaically) when a text is given a reading which could not have been intended by its author.

5. Richard Shusterman, 'The Logic of Evaluation', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 30 (1980): 327-341.

## TRUE INTERPRETATIONS

6. I have discussed this view in 'The Aesthetic Relevance of Authors' and Painters' Intentions', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 41 (1982): 65-76.