

The Principle of Charity

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Each of us has privileged access to our own thoughts and motivations. However, a long history of psychological research has shown that we are not very good at understanding the reasons for our own actions and behaviours – those reasons often are *unconscious* to us. We hold our own personal theories about why we act the way we do, but we often forget that our theories are based on inferences about ourselves – they are interpretations, not facts.

It is helpful to recognize that the human mind is a very sophisticated translator. It pools together our sensory experiences, and gives them meaning. And the mind is very effective at finding meaning. But it is also prone to make mistakes, to assign the wrong meanings.

In one classic study, psychologists had shoppers judge the quality of pantyhose. There were four different pairs arranged on a display, and the subjects were simply asked to judge which one they preferred after inspecting them in order from left to right. A very large percentage found that the fourth pair was of the highest quality, and most people seemed to have no trouble articulating why they preferred the one they did. Some liked its smoothness, while others liked its texture. Importantly, though, all four pairs of pantyhose were identical. Yet none of the subjects explained their preference by the order in which they inspected the pantyhose, the only real distinguishing factor.

The subjects observed themselves select the fourth pair, and their minds had no trouble coming up with reasons for their choices. The problem was that the reasons were incorrect. Their minds assigned the wrong meaning to the choices. They selected the ones they did for some complex set of reasons, but it was not for the reasons they claimed. There was a translation error.

Now, the problem of judging the reasons behind behaviour is even more difficult when we try to understand other people. We do not have the same privileged access to their thoughts, and so understanding their motivations introduces additional uncertainty. I want to stress that one of the biggest obstacles to social harmony – at home, in the workplace, and in the national political sphere – is the tendency to mistake our translations for facts. We have the feeling that we *know* why people do things, and often forget that we really only have *translations* for why they do those things.

I would like to offer a simple methodological prescription for fighting our natural tendency to treat our own interpretations as facts. It relies on the appreciation that our mind is a translator and one that is prone to make mistakes. The idea is called the *principle of charity*: you should try to interpret the statements and actions of people in a way that maximizes the reasonableness of those statements and actions. The underlying assumption is that most of the time people are quite reasonable, and so exercising the principle of charity can mitigate potential misunderstandings.

To illustrate the principle, suppose you are communicating with another person through a translator, and you get the feeling that he is saying nonsense. You face a choice. You can conclude that he is indeed talking nonsense, or alternatively that maybe you are getting a lousy translation. By tentatively supposing the latter, one will be more apt to work to understand the speaker rather than dismiss him as a fool. Now, the person may be a fool and continued dialogue may make that clear. But exercising the principle of charity can help one avoid concluding he is a fool when he is not.

To use another very common example, the next time someone does not respond to your email, you will face a choice. You can conclude that the person does not see responding to you as a priority, perhaps that he is disrespectful or ungrateful. Alternatively, you can try to apply the principle of charity and consider other reasons for the absent response. Maybe the recipient is busy finishing a project, and is postponing responding to most incoming emails until he can do so thoughtfully. Or maybe the email was deleted inadvertently. The number of reasonable explanations is so vast that it would be somewhat arrogant to presume that the real reason is somehow about you. It may be that the person does not see you as a priority or does not respect you enough to reply. The principle of charity just urges one to postpone that judgment because our mind is often a lousy translator.

Throughout Europe – in fact throughout the world – immigration is a tense political issue. With increased immigration, there is a corresponding increase in the frequency with which people from different cultures interact. Hence, there is an increased need for translation, and increased opportunities for misunderstanding. Not only do we need to translate across languages, but we must also translate our observations of people's behaviour into explanations we ourselves understand.

I take it as an obvious point that we will be collectively better off if we understand one another and communicate more effectively. This does not mean that we need to all agree or share the same values. What it does mean is that we should work to avoid lousy translations. The best way to leverage the principle of charity is to practice it, and to use the phrase itself in one's speech. If you start to use the term yourself in conversation, you will find that quickly you will exercise the concept itself naturally. If you feel that I have been unclear, please try to exercise the principle of charity now.