

ToK Essay

Sample

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How can we distinguish
between good and bad
interpretations?

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Topic 5. How can we distinguish between good and bad interpretations? Discuss with reference to the arts and one other area of knowledge.

Interpretation is the consequence of the act of interpreting. When a person interprets an event, a fact or an occurrence of any published and/or written material, it begins to be understood and even exposed to a new way of being able to express himself.

For this, it is important to take care of the quality of the interpretations, since an interpretation that is not heard well or with a bad intention can also have disastrous consequences, such as the listeners not being able to understand the message correctly and giving rise to confusion, depending on the field in which it is being interpreted. For example, suppose we are in a business meeting with one of our German partners and we do not understand the interpreter well; we might not know what is being talked about or what we are signing, in the event that it is a meeting for the signing of a contract. A mispronunciation in the interpretation used in a business environment can cause a failure of the negotiation. Needless to say, the consequences that a misinterpretation could cause in the judicial field and that the translator does not speak the source or target language with the appropriate accent.

This view point gives rise to the TOK title which states that "How can we distinguish between good and bad interpretations?"

Before the in-depth analysis of the TOK title, it is important to develop an understanding of the key terms used in the TOK title. One of the most crucial word that requires attention is interpretation. The definition of interpretation is "to explain or declare the meaning of something, but mainly that of a text", "to explain actions, sayings or events that can be understood in various ways".

To discuss the TOK title, the essay will take into account two areas of knowledge – arts and human sciences.

The first area of knowledge under discussion is human sciences. It is seen that social values play a huge role in the interpretation of concepts and cues. One of the most common tools used to make interpretations across borders is language. There is a common claim in human sciences which states that – good interpretation is crucial for an area of knowledge.

For example, we all have heard the big news about Nelson Mandela's funeral, in which the sign interpreter seemed to invent his own language for the deaf. During the event, in December 2013, social networks exploded warning that the gestures that the "interpreter" was making did not make any sense. The interpreter later tried to defend himself by saying that he suffered a schizophrenic attack and that is why what happened was not his fault. Later it came to light that the supposed interpreter had been a fraud.

Also famous example of bad interpretation is about the bad time that US President Jimmy Carter had in 1977 on a diplomatic trip to Poland. In a brief welcome and thank you speech upon his arrival at the airport, Carter's accompanying interpreter made three unfortunate mistakes that would go down in history. On the one hand, when the president announced that he was glad to be in Poland, he translated something like he had left America to live in Poland. On the other hand, Carter praised the Polish Constitution of 1791 as one of the three 18th-century monuments to human rights, which, interpreted in Polish, sounded like a kind of mockery. Finally, the president, without losing his smile, announced that he would like to know the wishes of the Poles. And what the interpreter translated implied that the president had some kind of sexual interest in Poles.

However, a counterclaim also exists in human sciences which states that good interpretation is not always important. You tell the good from the bad interpretation. This is a matter of personal taste. It is true that there are trends, for example, many people liked the way Philip Seymour Hoffman interpreted. But, in case you don't like it, it wouldn't mean that you are wrong, at best you could say that you are eccentric.

Even if we admit that Hoffman is not objectively a great actor, why do so many people like him? For the same reason why do so many people like the Beatles, Shakespeare and Leonardo Da Vinci? The answer is – personal preferences.

The second area of knowledge under discussion in this essay is arts. In art, the interpretation can be defined as the fact that a material content, already given and independent of the interpreter, is "understood" or "translated" into a new form of expression. This concept is closely related to hermeneutics.

There is a common claim in art that interpretation exists in art. Artistic interpretation is the subjective value that a person or group gives to a piece of art, it can be considered the personal interaction between both elements. For example, there is visual art that can be interpreted. We can say that visual art is a term related to those works that can be appreciated fundamentally through the ability of sight, such as painting, photography or cinema (although this also includes sound). Similarly, a painting can be interpreted as well. For some interpreting is painting something different from what we are seeing but based on it. For others, to interpret is to distort what we see. For others it is to paint what we see but doing it "on our own". Understanding the context in which the artwork was made is essential to being able to interpret it. This contemplates knowing the time in which it was made, what social movements there were then, what role the work played in the artist's life, and if possible, the particular situation that artist was going through.

A counterclaim also exists in art which states that interpretation cannot define the value of art.

For example, take into account the interpretation of abstract art. To interpret this art - focus on the specific content and technique of the painting. Take note of how the painter uses color, lines, textures and balance. Notice how the different elements are distributed throughout the canvas. Decide how you would describe the painting to someone who cannot see it. However, you may notice that there is no good or bad interpretation in this example because abstract art is free from all these things.

Similarly, a play can be interpreted too. A play is a literary genre whose text is normally made up of dialogues between characters and with a certain order, susceptible to stage representation. Speeches, dialogues, mime, music, choreography, and other forms of artistic expression can be combined in its staging. These things depend on the taste of the person.

In art, instead of focusing on interpretation people look for the theme, of course, but also the objects, the symbols, the colors, the texture and – in short – the composition of the elements that make up the work. A painting usually evokes emotions before critical analysis, so let's save the emotional response for last and look first at the "how it was done".

Art valuation, a specific subset of financial valuation, is the process of estimating the market value of works of art. As such it is more of a financial concern than an aesthetic one, however subjective views of cultural value also play a part.

By keeping in view the aforementioned area of knowledge and claims, it is safe to say that bad interpretations and good interpretations exist. However, their role and importance in every area of knowledge differ.

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