

Interpreting an Author

Here is a quote from pages 513-4 of Lawrence A. Blum's book chapter, "Personal Relationships":

Personal relationships raise several distinct moral issues. One is whether personal relations involve moral requirements. It may seem that they do not, since at least their ideal forms must be based on love and care for the other's well-being. To act from obligation to further the friend's well-being seems to be at odds with acting from friendship ... We have less difficulty acknowledging moral requirements in familial relationships. ... And parental obligations to look after their children rest, in part, on a social foundation. Society has a stake in seeing that the young and vulnerable are cared for. ... Although society lacks a similar stake in the maintenance of friendships, friendship also involves moral requirements. For example, a friend is morally bound, because of loyalty, to stand up for her friend in the face of unjust attack.

Some things to keep in mind when interpreting a passage like this:

- Sometimes authors mention views that are not their own, so while reading you have to keep track of whether they are talking about their own view or not. For example, Blum starts by saying that it may seem that personal relations do not involve moral requirements. Only later on do we realize that he thinks friendships do involve moral requirements.
- Sometimes, in interpreting authors, there are multiple ways to interpret them. You should try to be as charitable as possible. So, if there are multiple ways of interpreting them, try to interpret them in the way that makes what they are saying plausible and keeps them from contradicting themselves. For instance, take Blum's statement that "society lacks a similar stake in the maintenance of friendships." What does he mean by this? Does he mean that friendship doesn't benefit society at all? Or just that friendship isn't required to make sure the young and vulnerable are taken care of? The first interpretation is pretty implausible; surely friendship benefits society in some ways. So it's better to interpret him in the second way.

Some examples to practice with from the Blum article I mentioned: try to figure out what Blum is saying:

1. "Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55) regarded universal love as the highest form of human love and found romantic and filial (friendship) love to be deficient ... Kierkegaard sees all friendship and sexual love as forms of self-love ... involving "no ethical task" . He is wrong to regard friendship and love as devoid of obligation ... being loyal, appropriately trusting ... and other elements of friendship are "ethical tasks" essential to such a friendship" (516-7).

What do you think: does Blum think friendship involves no ethical task? Does he think universal love is the highest form of human love? How does Kierkegaard think friendship being a form of self-love is connected with friendship not involving any ethical task?

2. "However, there seems an unavoidable cultural relativity in assessing the value of personal relationships. For example, the Chinese Confucian tradition places a greater emphasis on honoring one's parents ... than does Western ethical thought. If a culture views familial relations as more important and valuable than friendship ... it is difficult to see how we could say that one culture is right and the other wrong. We may, however, be able to say that certain goods are not as fully recognized in one culture than another" (523).

What do you think: does Blum think cultural relativity is unavoidable in assessing the value of personal relationships? What does he mean when he says "it is difficult to see how we could say that one culture is right and the other wrong" – Does he mean that it is difficult to see any reasons someone might have for saying this? Or that it is difficult to see any *good* reasons someone might have for saying this? Or something else?