

THERE'S A NICE KNOCKDOWN ARGUMENT FOR YOU: DONALD DAVIDSON AND MODEST INTENTIONALISM

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I.

It might come as a surprise for someone who has only a superficial knowledge of Donald Davidson's philosophy that he has claimed literary language to be 'a prime test of the adequacy of any view on the nature of language'.¹ The claim, however, captures well the transformation that has happened in Davidson's thinking on language since he began in the 1960's to develop a truth-conditional semantic theory for natural languages in the lines of Alfred Tarski's semantic conception of truth. About twenty years afterwards, this project was replaced with a view that highlights the flexible nature of language and, in consequence, the importance of the speaker's intentions for a theory of meaning, culminating in Davidson's staggering claim that 'there is no such thing as a language'.²

In insisting on the close relationship between intention and meaning, Davidson's concerns clearly overlap with recent Anglo-American aesthetics where one of the hottest debates has involved the question of the relevance of the author's intentions for the meaning of her work. Despite these similar concerns Davidson's work is, strangely, barely cited. This essay explores that relationship and presents the claim that Davidson's views on the relationship between meaning and intention are in decisive ways different from those supported by current modest intentionalists. The difference especially has to do with the role of conventions and where the limits of intending something lie, and at the

¹ Davidson (2005/1993): 167.

² Davidson (2005/1986): 107.

end of the essay, I will argue that these discrepancies might have a substantial effect on the intentionalist debate as a whole.

Although Davidson does insist that language is a social art, he believes that explaining how it functions cannot be fully grasped by appealing to rule-governed conventions. After P.F. Strawson had argued against Bertrand Russell that logically proper names do not refer to anything by themselves, but people do by using them, it became popular to regard language as an enterprise governed by a different set of rules and conventions that the speaker and hearer must share in order for communication to succeed. The speaker was always seen as a part of some language game, and his intention to mean something was confined by its rules. This line of thinking is especially apparent in John Searle's theory of speech acts, which, I believe, systematized the views that were implicitly present in Ludwig Wittgenstein and John L. Austin.³

Davidson finds it puzzling how this kind of view of language has sustained for so long even though it is countered by our frequent experience where the regularities and conventions of language are broken by novel uses of language and malapropisms, but in which we have no difficulties in understanding the intended meanings. If these kinds of cases are possible, how can language be exhaustively explained by appealing to conventions?⁴ Davidson believes that it cannot because 'a deeper notion of what words, when spoken in context, mean' is needed than conventions can offer.⁵

For Davidson, the failure of the conventionalists can leave only the option that the speaker's intention has to have a more prominent role in determining what expressions can mean in a language. But it is important to note that he does not think that the speaker can mean anything with his choice of words, because the hearer's readiness to interpret the utterances must be taken into account. Intention to mean something and to be interpreted in a certain way are always connected to expectations, and the speaker must believe that his intended meaning can be understood. Merely intending to mean,

³ Searle's account of the relationship between intention, meaning, and conventions captures this particular view of the language user: 'The intention will in general be achieved if the hearer understands the sense, i.e., knows its meaning, i.e., knows the rules governing its elements' (Searle 1969, p. 48).

⁴ As an example Davidson uses the peculiar way in which radio sitcom writer Goodman Ace both talked and wrote. He insists that this kind of language use happens 'all the time', and that it is in fact 'ubiquitous' because of which philosophers should not play down its relevance for philosophy. (Davidson 2005/1986, p. 89).

⁵ Ibid.: 91.

therefore, does not guarantee that the expression will mean what it was intended to mean, but ‘you can change the meaning provided you believe... that the interpreter has adequate clues for the new interpretation’.⁶ Analogously, if I had believed that the intended meaning couldn’t be achieved, I would not have uttered the words I did, because they could not have had the intended meaning in that particular context.

The reason why conventions, at the end, fail is that they cannot capture the unique and novel features, which are involved in determining what words can mean in a particular context as uttered by a particular speaker. Mediating conventions cannot regularize the possibility of understanding; in many cases it is achieved ‘by wit, luck, and wisdom’.⁷ For these reasons, the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by an appeal to conventions’ should be abandoned.⁸ Conventions cannot have the kind of constraining force on intending as has been believed. This is also something, I believe, certain forms of modest intentionalism have also overlooked.

II.

The recent debate over intention in aesthetics could be structured around the different theories supported such as actual and hypothetical intentionalism, but it can also be approached through a literary figure, namely Humpty Dumpty. He is, of course, a figure in Lewis Carroll’s Alice story *Through the Looking Glass*, in which he claims to Alice, who wonders what Humpty’s expressions mean, that when he uses a word it means what he intends it to mean. This is Humpty-Dumpty-ism. Philosophers, however, have considered Humpty’s claim impossible, and he has been regarded as ‘a monster of private language’.⁹

Humpty appears everywhere in the intentionalist debate. Already Beardsley referred to him and the example was one of the reasons why he ended supporting anti-intentionalism: the thesis that intentions are irrelevant for the meaning of the work.¹⁰ Nowadays, only a few truly support Beardsley anymore, but some form of intentionalism

⁶ Ibid.: 98.

⁷ Ibid.: 107.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Hancher (1981): 49.

¹⁰ Cf. Beardsley (1981).

has emerged as the most supported theory. Some kind of extra-textual intentional agent has been considered a necessary precondition for meaning.

Three different intentionalist theories can be abstracted from the current debate. Absolute intentionalism insists that the meaning is wholly determined by the author's intention, and recently one of its supporters, William Irwin, has explicitly stated that if Humpty had the intention to mean 'there's a nice knockdown argument for you' with 'there's glory for you', the utterance truly meant that.¹¹ Humpty Dumpty-ism isn't a problem for him. This thesis, however, is not widely shared, but most of the participants in the debate seem to acknowledge that there must be a certain gap between what is intended and what the text ends up meaning. There must be a logical possibility for the intention to fail.

The importance of this distinction is insisted especially in hypothetical intentionalism developed by Jerrold Levinson in recent years. Gary Iseminger, an actual intentionalist himself, thinks that the main reason why Levinson supports this view over more traditional intentionalism is the threat of Humpty Dumpty-ism.¹² As Levinson himself says, intention to mean something must have constraints because both 'writer and reader are bound' by 'shared knowledge of traditions, oeuvres, writerly identities, and the like'.¹³ By identifying work meaning as the best hypothesis made by an appropriately informed audience, Levinson's view clearly manages to sustain the gap, but I think he has slightly overlooked that the challenge of Humpty Dumpty has also been taken seriously by those who support moderate or modest actual intentionalism, which is the most widely supported theory in the debate. If this challenge were to be met, there might be no reason for supporting hypothetical intentionalism.

Modest intentionalism considers that the actual intentions of the author are relevant for the meaning of the work, but the epithet 'modest' implies that the text or work cannot mean whatever the author wants it to mean. Paisley Livingston spells this out by claiming 'some (but not all) artist's semantic and other intentions are relevant, even necessary, to

¹¹ Cf. Irwin (2000): 56-57.

¹² Cf. Iseminger (1996): 323.

¹³ Levinson (1996): 184.

some (but not all) valuable interpretive insights because such intentions are sometimes constitutive of the work's content'.¹⁴

Modest intentionalists support their theory because they are dissatisfied with all the others. Anti-intentionalism neglects the meaning constitutive role of the author's intention, whereas by debunking the author's actual intentions hypothetical intentionalism cannot make the work's meaning determinate enough for fruitful criticism. Modest intentionalists believe that both problems can be overcome by appealing to the real or actual intentions of the author, not to hypothetical constructions of the m, but at the same time it does not lead to Humpty Dumpty-ism like absolute intentionalism.¹⁵ This is because modest intentionalism insists that there must be some constraints on what can be intended.

But what are the constraints? Livingston has argued that the intention has to be within 'natural and logical limits', meaning that the intention to mean something might fail if it is impossible to convey the intended meaning with that particular choice of words.¹⁶ But what are these limits based on? Noël Carroll has insisted on the constraining force of the conventions of language and literature, and that the intention must be supported by the structure of the text.¹⁷ If the work's structure is incompatible with the intention, the intention has failed, and the work does not mean what the author intended.

There is, therefore, no reason to support hypothetical intentionalism because modest intentionalism can keep the cake and eat it too. It can acknowledge the relevance of the author's actual intention and make the work's meaning determinate enough, but at the same time, it does not fall into Humpty Dumpty-ism, because the intentions are constrained by the possible meanings utterances can have in a language. Carroll states this himself clearly:

Modest actual intentionalism blocks Humpty Dumpty –ism because even if Humpty Dumpty intends 'glory' to mean 'knockdown argument', that is not a meaning that the textual unit ('glory') can have. The intentions of authors that the modest actual intentionalist takes seriously are only those intentions of the author that the linguistic/literary unit can support (given the conventions of language and literature).¹⁸

¹⁴ Livingston (1996): 627.

¹⁵ Cf. Livingston (1996); and Iseminger (1996).

¹⁶ Livingston (1998): 844.

¹⁷ Carroll (2001/2000).

¹⁸ Ibid.: 198.

So, Livingston and Carroll have introduced two constraints: the former believes intentions must be in certain limits, and the latter believes that these are given by the conventions of language and literature. Now, it is time to see, do Davidson's views have something to offer.

III.

On the face of it, there does not seem to be a huge difference between Davidson and modest intentionalism; intention is relevant, but one cannot mean what one likes. There, however, is a slight, but at the end, significant difference, because, I believe, Davidson's argument against the rule-governed nature of language also undermines both Livingston's and Carroll's arguments: conventions cannot have the kind of constraining force as they suggest. There must be limits on what can be meant but when analysed more fully what these are, at the end, based on, some interesting points emerge concerning the difference between hypothetical and modest intentionalism. Again, Humpty Dumpty can be used to illuminate the point.

The deep difference between Davidson and both Carroll and Livingston is that his theory implies that there can be neither logical nor natural limits that would give the reasons why it would be impossible to mean 'knockdown argument' with 'glory'. But despite of this allowance it does not fall into Humpty Dumpty-ism. How is this possible? According to Samuel Wheeler, Davidson would conclude that in the case at hand, Humpty's utterance could not have meant what he intended, but there is no reason to think that this was because of the conventions of language as Carroll thinks. In this case, Carroll arrived at the right conclusion, but for the wrong reasons, because the reason why Humpty could not have meant what he intended was that Alice had no way of understanding the intended meaning, not because conventions constrain what can be meant. In different circumstances the result could have been different.¹⁹

Humpty's failure, therefore, was not that he broke the rules of the language game but something Davidson calls 'the requirement of interpretability': the speaker must make himself interpretable in such a way that it is possible for the hearer to make the intended

¹⁹ Wheeler (2003): 201.

interpretation. Humpty's utterance was meaningless, because Alice had no possibility of achieving the intended interpretation, not because the conventions of language could not give 'the textual unit' the intended meaning.

Now we approach Davidson's views on literary language in which the relevance of intention is a crucial component, because it highlights the creative potentials of language. However, since intention to mean something always carries with itself a reference to the hearer's or reader's possibility of understanding, meaning in literature involves a certain interaction between author and reader. The author cannot ignore how the reader is prepared to interpret his utterances because the intention to mean something must be formed through the possibility that it can be interpreted in the intended way. The intention must be reasonable, but, of course, in literary contexts the author's knowledge of the reader's readiness to interpret his utterances cannot be as specific as in ordinary communicative situations.²⁰

Davidson is as sceptic about the role of conventions in the case of literature as in ordinary communication; there is no reason to presuppose the existence of shared conventions with a detailed content on which the author could rely in order to get his intention to mean something succeed. But, analogously, this means that conventions and past usages cannot restrict what can be meant, as Carroll seems to argue. As Wheeler puts it, 'the effect of 'rules' is achieved just by mutual expectations [of the author and reader], together with the intent to communicate'.²¹ Conventions do not pose restrictions on what can be meant and past usage cannot fully govern present meanings, but only the *clues* that the author must give in order to make his writings interpretable for the reader. This is, again, the requirement of interpretability, and in literature, the possibility of interpretation might involve highly unique things that no convention can embrace or govern. According to Davidson, this is especially true of James Joyce:

Joyce draws on every resource his readers command (or that he hopes they command, or thinks they should command), every linguistic resource, knowledge history, geography, past writers, and styles. He forces us both to look at and listen to his words to find the puns and fathom the references.²²

²⁰ Davidson (2005/1989): 147.

²¹ Wheeler (2003): 199.

²² Davidson (2005/1989): 147.

Davidson sees a similarity between James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty; both were innovators of language but unlike the later, Joyce gave subtle often hard to get clues as to how his utterances should be interpreted. Humpty, on the other hand, was an unsuccessful innovator because he did not give the required clues. He was not an innovator because his utterances were not meaningful language. But, 'it's clear that when Joyce was flying by the net of language, he did not intend to leave us entangled'.²³ As the longer quote shows, often the disentanglement involves highly delicate and unique bits of knowledge and since these clues are hard to dig up 'as much is demanded from the reader as of the author.... By fragmentating familiar languages and recycling the raw material Joyce provokes the reader into involuntary collaboration'.²⁴

Joyce's works shoot us into a 'verbal exile', but if it is accepted that the result of the collaboration is meaningful language, it is strange what Livingston means by his contention that the intention has to be 'in natural and logical limits'. Is Joyce's language in these limits? And if it is, what does this mean? On what is this naturalness and logicalness based on? But it is even more likely that Carroll's insistence on the Humpty Dumpty case cannot be adequate because if we believe Davidson, the reason why Humpty could not have meant what he intended was not the reason given by Carroll. Conventions cannot restrict intention in this way because in that case it might even be difficult to explain how Joyce's prose can be meaningful.

About twenty-five years ago, Michael Hancher noted that in 'the age of Saussure and Wittgenstein' Humpty Dumpty is left alone without 'real allies'.²⁵ At the age of Davidson, his case would at least have a hearing, and the reasons why he should have one will have implications for the current debate over intention.

For modest intentionalism, I believe, it implies that its supporters should pay more attention where the limits of meaning something truly lie (Livingston), and what kind of intentions should be taken 'seriously' (Carroll). Davidson's theory shows that conventions or talk of abstract limits clearly cannot do the required job. The question of these limits, however, is essential, because the attempt to sustain the gap between what is intended and what the work ends up meaning is the most important difference between

²³ Ibid.: 153.

²⁴ Ibid.: 156-157.

²⁵ Hancher (1981): 50.

modest intentionalism and its absolute brother; a difference that is considered highly important by its supporters. The kinds of reasons given by Livingston and Carroll cannot, however, be the adequate means for sustaining the gap.

Since Davidson did not fall into Humpty-Dumpty-ism, there, of course, remains the possibility of elaborating his ideas into a version of modest intentionalism. In this case, the important fact to note, however, is that for Davidson the possibility of intending a certain meaning always involves the hearer's or reader's possibilities of understanding. Modest intentionalists argued that there is no reason to support hypothetical intentionalism, because it can avoid Humpty Dumpty-ism by setting limits on what can be meant. This implies that in interpretive disputes a supporter of modest intentionalism must be able to prove that something could, in fact, have been meant. Merely intending to mean something does not guarantee that the end result will mean what it was intended to mean, so you must give good reasons for believing in the successfulness of the intention.

But the Davidsonian perspective seems to argue that in order to show this, the modest intentionalist must rely on similar evidence than what hypothetical intentionalism considers relevant – ‘shared knowledge of traditions, oeuvres, writerly identities, and the like’.²⁶ Perhaps Livingston was right to insist on ‘logical and natural limits’, but overlooked that, at the end, these limits consist of something the author and audience must share and that in many cases, it involves something highly unique that is not accounted for by the conventions of language and literature to which Carroll referred. As Wheeler stated above, it is more a matter of mutual expectations than conventions.

This would be Davidsonian modest intentionalism. But if my characterization of it, where the audience plays a crucial role, is accepted, will there any longer be a significant difference between modest and hypothetical intentionalism? This is a question I cannot pursue here in more detail, but I believe that when pressed far enough the whole debate might truly turn out to be ‘spurious’, as Peter Lamarque has argued, because in practice modest actual intentionalism ‘collapses into hypothetical intentionalism’.²⁷

²⁶ Levinson (1996): 184.

²⁷ Lamarque (2004): 7.

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