

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

Meaning and Intention: A Defence of Procedural Individualism

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3p79m1dd>

Journal

New Literary History, 31

Author

Bevir, Mark

Publication Date

2000

Peer reviewed

MEANING AND INTENTION:
A DEFENCE OF PROCEDURAL INDIVIDUALISM

By

Mark Bevir

Department of Political Science

University of California, Berkeley

California 94720

U.S.A

ABSTRACT

This paper defends a weak intentionalism, or procedural individualism, according to which any meaning, or at least any meaning with a temporal existence, is either a meaning for a specific person or an abstraction based on such meanings. All historical meanings are intentional in the weak sense of being meanings for specific people. We can individuate such weak intentions, moreover, solely by reference to the individual for whom they exist. This weak intentionalism or procedural individualism differs from strong intentionalism in ways that facilitate effective responses to the criticisms of the latter raised by New Critics, psycho-analytic theorists, and others. In addition, it helps us to make sense of cases in which there seem to be peculiar difficulties in identifying who or what is the author of an utterance.

MEANING AND INTENTION: A DEFENCE OF PROCEDURAL INDIVIDUALISM

Many historians of religion, literary historians, and other textual scholars have understood their task to be the recovery of authorial intentions.¹ In recovering such intentions, moreover, they have taken themselves to be telling us something about the meanings of the relevant utterances. The intentionalism of such scholars, whether implicit or explicit, has been the subject of fierce theoretical criticism over the last thirty years.² Indeed, the criticism has been so fierce that intentionalism now has about it a definite aura of theoretical naiveté. One strand of criticism centres on the difficulties of identifying or even postulating authors for certain utterances - the Bible or a “keep off the grass” sign, for example. Another, more influential strand of criticism highlights various gaps between an author’s intentions and the meaning of the relevant utterance: gaps associated, for example, with the space between intention and performance, the different ways in which one might understand an utterance, and the effects of the unconscious mind of the author.

All too often, it seems to me, the criticisms are directed at a caricature of the intentionalist position. Few intentionalists, I suspect, want to defend the strong thesis that the only legitimate meaning an utterance may bear is fixed by the conscious, prior purpose of its author. Anyway, irrespective of what other intentionalists would wish to argue, I want to defend a procedural individualism according to which any meaning, or at least any meaning with a temporal existence, is either a meaning for a specific person or an abstraction based on such meanings. The possible restriction of my defence of procedural individualism to meanings with a temporal existence reflects my concern to avoid debates about the possibility of divine or other

metaphysical meanings.³ Clearly some Biblical scholars want to treat the Bible as an atemporal, divine revelation. Even when scholars thus postulate atemporal, metaphysical meanings, however, they presumably will allow that the relevant utterance or utterances have a historical existence such that they have had meanings for people within time. So, if my reader does not believe in metaphysical meanings, he may take procedural individualism to apply to meanings as such; but if he does believe in such meanings, he might take it not to apply to them.

My defence of this procedural individualism will have four sections. In the first, I will argue that all temporal meanings are intentional in the weak sense of being meanings for specific people. More abstract meanings, such as semantic and linguistic ones, are either based on intentional meanings or they are atemporal. In the second section, I will argue, against occasionalists, that we can individuate such weak intentions solely by reference to the individual for whom they exist. In the third section, I will suggest that procedural individualism differs from strong intentionalism in ways which enable us to respond effectively to the criticisms made of the latter by the New Critics, psycho-analytic theorists, and others. Finally, I will conclude by exploring how procedural individualism helps us to make sense of cases in which there seem to be peculiar difficulties in identifying who or what is the author of an utterance.

I

To begin, I want to argue that meanings are intentional in that they exist only in the minds of specific people. Meanings are always fixed by the mental (or intentional) activity of a given individual. One way of approaching the question of what sort of meanings have a temporal existence is tangentially by way of a study of

the nature of the meaning an utterance has for a reader. The meaning of an utterance to a reader can not be its semantic meaning, defined in terms of the truth-conditions of a proposition, because readers sometimes find meanings in statements whose semantic properties elude them. Similarly, the meaning of an utterance to a reader can not be its linguistic meaning, defined in terms of the conventions governing the usage of a particular language, because readers sometimes find meanings in statements whose linguistic properties elude them. More generally, when someone understands an utterance to have a particular meaning, that meaning is not necessarily the same as the truth-conditions for, or the conventional meaning of, that utterance abstracted from the particular instance being considered.⁴ Imagine, for example, that Paul and Susan are walking through the East End of London puzzling over a problem. As they turn a corner, Susan suggests a solution to the problem, and, at exactly the same moment, sees a religious hostel for the homeless staffed by women whose uniform closely resembles that of the Salvation Army. Paul says “hallelujah lass”. Because Susan does not know that “Hallelujah Lass” is a name for a female member of the Salvation Army, she takes Peter to mean “well done, what a brilliant idea”. In this case, Susan’s understanding of Paul’s utterance does not enable us to declare the semantic or linguistic meaning of “hallelujah lass” to be “well done”. “Hallelujah lass” means “well done” to Susan on a particular occasion, but this tells us little about the more abstract semantic or linguistic properties of “hallelujah lass”. It would appear, therefore, that the meaning of an utterance to a reader is a particular meaning for that person, not a more abstract one.

The meaning of an utterance to a reader certainly has many similarities with the meaning of an utterance to its author. Both are meanings individuals place or find in particular utterances, where the abstract propositions embodied in the utterances

have certain semantic and linguistic meanings. The only difference is that authors appear to play a more active role than readers. Moreover, one might want to capture the comparative passivity of the reader by saying that whereas speakers intend to convey meanings, listeners merely happen to grasp meanings. Because this is the only difference, however, we can classify the meaning of an utterance to a reader as a form of intentional meaning provided we adopt a weak form of intentionalism; we can do so provided we expand our concept of an intention from the idea of wanting to convey a meaning to embrace also the idea of happening to grasp a meaning. Because the concept of an intention usually suggests a prior design to do something, intentionalism often appears to equate meanings exclusively with what authors want their utterances to mean. In contrast, I will adopt a weak intentionalism that equates meanings with the ways particular individuals, whether they be authors or readers, understand utterances. The crux of intentionalism thus becomes the idea that meanings are ascribed to objects by the intentional or mental activity of individuals, rather than properties intrinsic to the objects in themselves. Weak intentionalism implies only that meanings have no existence apart from individuals. Utterances have meanings only because individuals take them so to do.

The important point is that weak intentionalism makes any meaning an utterance has for any individual an intentional one. The meaning of an utterance to any reader, as well as to its author, is an intentional meaning. Once we accept this, we can redefine what is at stake in the question of whether all meanings are intentional. To argue that they are is to defend a principle of procedural individualism. Weak intentionalism implies utterances have meaning only for specific individuals whether authors, readers, or even scholars themselves. This procedural individualism does not presuppose any of the other doctrines that have gone by the name of individualism; it

commits us, for instance, neither to an atomist individualism according to which individuals could exist, grasp meanings, or perform actions apart from society, nor to a methodological individualism according to which we should study society without referring to social wholes.⁵

To defend a principle of procedural individualism, one has to suggest that all meanings, or at least all temporal meanings, are intentional. I will do this in two ways. In the first place, I will defend an analysis of linguistic and semantic meanings that reduces them to intentional ones. However, these analyses will constitute an inductive argument focusing on semantic and linguistic meanings, so someone might argue that there is another type of meaning we can not reduce to intentional ones. Thus, I will support these analyses with an argument to suggest that any meaning we could not reduce to intentional ones would be atemporal.

If we can reduce semantic and linguistic meanings to intentional ones, we can make their existence compatible with procedural individualism. Consider first the case of semantic meanings. The semantic meaning of an utterance comes from what would have to be the case for it to be true. Assuming, as I will, that there are no pure perceptions, what would have to be the case for an utterance to be true must be relative to some conceptual framework. Thus, because conceptual frameworks are held only by individuals, semantic meanings can not exist apart from for individuals. Utterances can acquire a semantic meaning only within a set of concepts held by one or more individual. Semantic meanings are abstractions based on intentional ones. When we say the semantic meaning of an utterance is such and such, we imply a group of individuals, usually including ourselves, share a conceptual framework within which they would accept the utterance as true if such and such is the case.

Consider now the case of linguistic meanings. The linguistic meaning of a word comes from the concept to which it conventionally refers: thus, the linguistic meaning of “bachelor” is an unmarried man. It seems clear, moreover, that the bond between a word and the concept that constitutes its linguistic meaning is a purely conventional one without any natural foundation: thus, social convention could decree that the word “bac” rather than “bachelor” refer to an unmarried man.⁶ Although some words might seem to be a peculiarly apt expression for a given concept, as in cases of onomatopoeia, even here there clearly could be a convention binding a different word to the relevant concept. Crucially, because linguistic meanings are purely conventional, they are given simply by what individuals do and do not accept as a convention. Their existence is a function solely of the fact that a number of individuals take certain words to refer to certain concepts.⁷ Linguistic meanings are abstractions based on intentional ones. When we say the linguistic meaning of an utterance is such and such, we imply a group of individuals accept certain conventions under which they understand it to refer to such and such.

We can conclude, therefore, that semantic and linguistic meanings are reducible to intentional ones. Critics might suggest, however, that there is another form of meaning that we can not reduce to intentional ones. To counter such a criticism, I will argue that any form of meaning we could not so reduce would have to be atemporal. From now on I will simplify my argument by adopting a single contrast between an intentional meaning, defined as the meaning an utterance has for a particular individual, and a structural meaning, defined as any meaning it might have that we could not reduce to intentional ones. We can approach utterances in one of two contrasting ways depending on which sort of meaning interests us, or better whether or not we believe in structural meanings. If we want to know about an

intentional meaning or an abstraction based on intentional meanings, we will consider an utterance as a work, that is, a set of words written, or spoken, or understood in a particular way on a particular occasion. If we want to postulate a structural meaning, we will consider an utterance as a text, that is, as a set of words, pictures, or whatever possessing a meaning given, in some way or other, independently of all people.

To vindicate an intentionalist analysis of meaning, we have to show that structural meanings and texts are necessarily atemporal, other-worldly objects, and so things of which we in this world can not have knowledge. In effect, there are no structural meanings and no texts.⁸ Imagine that someone in the eighteenth century wrote an essay, containing a section entitled “hallelujah lass”. If we try to study the essay as a text, we will have to abstract the words and phrases in it from the occasion of its appearance. Moreover, when we try to identify the structural meaning of the essay, we presumably must allow for the fact that the phrase “hallelujah lass” can refer to a female member of the Salvation Army. The structural meaning of the text of the essay must include a reference to the idea of a female member of the Salvation Army. Clearly, therefore, the text does not exist in time - it must be outside of our world. After all, if we try to ascribe a temporal existence to the structural meaning of the text, we will find an essay written in the eighteenth century referred to an organisation that was not established until the late nineteenth century. We will be stuck with an unacceptable anachronism.

In order to locate a supposed text in time, we would have to appeal to something outside of it, but as soon as we do this, we necessarily switch our attention from the supposed text and its structural meaning to a work and its intentional meaning. Imagine that we have two essays, one written in the eighteenth century and one written in the twentieth century containing exactly the same words and

punctuation in exactly the same order. Any fact enabling us to distinguish between the meaning of the two essays would have to refer to the particular occasion of the appearance of one or other of them; it would have to be a fact about the essays as works, not texts. Moreover, because the two essays are identical, they surely must share the same structural meaning. Thus, if the twentieth century essay contains a section headed “hallelujah lass” so that “a female member of the Salvation Army” is part of the supposed structural meaning of its text, the supposed structural meaning of the text of the eighteenth century essay also must include mention of the Salvation Army. Once again, therefore, we can not ascribe a real or temporal existence to texts without falling into unacceptable anachronisms. We can not do so because texts do not have a historical existence. As soon as we consider an utterance as a historical object, we necessarily focus our attention on its intentional meaning as a work. The obvious way to fix an utterance in history is to consider the meaning it had for certain people. We might say, for example, that our two identical essays have different meanings because the words they contain meant different things to people in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. To ask about the meaning an utterance had for a particular group of people, however, is, given a weak version of intentionalism, to ask about the meaning of various works. To ask what the essay meant to people in the eighteenth century is to ask how they understood the essay, which is to ask about their weak intentions. We can conclude, therefore, that only intentional meanings and works have a real or temporal existence.

Once one adopts a weak intentionalism according to which the meaning of an utterance to any given individual becomes a species of intentional meaning, there is only one way to avoid an intentionalist analysis of meaning without postulating some sort of divine or supernatural realm of which allegedly we can acquire knowledge.

One must identify a language-x with a meaning-x existing in history, as do intentional meanings, but existing independently of particular individuals, as would metaphysical meanings. Although some scholars have tried to defend something akin to language-x, their endeavours seem doomed to fail.⁹ Consider what is involved in abandoning the idea that temporal meanings exist only for individuals. When we talk of a social language, we typically have in mind a set of inter-subjective meanings shared by various people. For example, when two people talk of a female friend who is a member of the Salvation Army by saying “Jane is a Hallelujah Lass”, they share a set of meanings which constitute the language they use to communicate. Thus, although we might describe their shared language as a social structure, we would not thereby commit ourselves to the claim that it exists independently of particular individuals. On the contrary, it exists only because they, as individuals, share certain meanings. Because language-x does not embody this sort of inter-subjectivity, its ontological status remains extremely vague. It can not be a concrete entity; nor can it be an emergent entity, since if it were it would have to emerge from facts about individuals. Indeed, language-x must exist independently of human thought, since our thoughts are facts about us, so if language-x depended for its existence on our thoughts, it would not exist independently of us as individuals. Language-x must be a Platonic form; it must be an abstract entity with a real and independent existence. Although Platonic forms have had an honoured place in the history of philosophy, a (post)modern suspicion of the very possibility of self-evident truths makes a belief in them hard to defend. Moreover, the opponents of procedural individualism face special difficulties since a belief in a language-x existing in time requires them to ascribe a temporal existence to a Platonic form. They must explain how a Platonic form can exist for some time and then wither. How can a Platonic form be subject to natural processes

such as those of growth and decay? Surely any theory of meaning that finds itself having to answer this question has gone wildly astray.

All temporal meanings are either meanings for individuals or abstractions derived from meanings for individuals. Here procedural individualism provides us with the beginnings of an analysis of meaning. It implies that individuals associate meanings with statements, books, films, events, and the like: statements, books, films, events, and the like, do not of themselves embody meanings. Objects come to mean something only because someone understands them so to do. Perhaps this idea of meanings being human constructs might seem uncontroversial, but even if it does, this uncontroversial idea has controversial corollaries. For a start, it implies that we can not ascribe meanings to texts. Because meanings always exist only for individuals, we can not ascribe a meaning to a text in itself. Unless a textual scholar specifies, albeit implicitly, the particular person or people for whom he thinks a text had a particular meaning, we should assume he is merely telling us how he chooses to read the text: we should not make the mistake of assuming he is offering us an interpretation of the text itself; we might enjoy his reading, but we should not bother to ask ourselves whether it is true or false for there is no object of which it seeks to give an adequate account. We can ask only about the meaning a text had or has for so-and-so, that is, the meaning of a work. Moreover, the idea that meanings are human constructs implies we must reject the possibility of a collective consciousness being greater than its individual constituents. It makes sense to talk of a Protestant mentality or Hindu fundamentalism only if we aim thereby to highlight the fact of various individuals sharing certain beliefs. As a matter of principle, we must be able to translate any statement about a collective consciousness into a series of statements about specific

individuals. Meanings can be inter-subjective, but an inter-subjective meaning is just a result of specific individuals attaching the same meaning to a given object.

II

All meanings derive ultimately from intentions. This leaves an important question still to be answered: can we identify and individuate a particular intention solely in terms of facts about the person whose intention it is? Perhaps I was too quick to adopt procedural individualism. I have established only that we can focus exclusively on intentional meanings, and this does not necessarily allow me to conclude that we can fix an intention solely by reference to the individual whose intention it is. Moreover, if we can not individuate intentions solely by reference to the individuals whose intentions they are, we will be unable to specify the content of a meaning solely in terms of facts about the relevant individual. It is this line of argument that leads some occasionalists to reject intentionalism.

Utterances obviously are situated historically. They are made in, and refer to, occasions which exist irrespective of the intentions of their authors. For example, when Peter says “hallelujah lass”, he does so in the context of, and with some reference to, an occasion composed of specific objects and events, including both Susan's suggestion and the hostel for the homeless. Occasionalists argue that the situated nature of utterances implies that their meaning necessarily reflects aspects of the occasions of their being made. Most occasionalists argue this with respect to abstract semantic meanings. Hilary Putnam, for instance, invites us to imagine a twin-earth where a substance called “water” plays exactly the same role as water does on earth even though it is chemically different from water on earth.¹⁰ Twin-earth water looks, tastes, sounds, and behaves just like water, but it has the chemical composition

XYZ, not H₂O. Thus, if both my doppelganger on twin-earth and I talk about water in terms of the role it plays, it seems we express the same belief but refer to different things. We both believe “water plays such and such a role”, but whereas he refers to XYZ, I refer to H₂O. Putnam concludes that because identical beliefs can refer to different things, mental content can not fix reference. Clearly Putnam's occasionalism applies only to abstract semantic meanings, not particular ones. Both my doppelganger and I intend to express the idea that water plays such and such a role, and anyone on our respective earths who so understands us will have grasped correctly our particular intentions. It is just that the truth-conditions of our utterances treated abstractly as propositions will differ. Whereas the abstract proposition embodied in my utterance on earth will be true if H₂O plays such and such a role, the abstract proposition embodied in his utterance on twin-earth will be true if XYZ plays such and such a role. Putnam certainly does not suggest the occasion of an utterance enters into the particular intention of its author. On the contrary, he concludes that mental content does not fix reference precisely because he thinks the occasion of an utterance enters into its semantic meaning or reference but not its particular meaning or mental content. Clearly, therefore, his semantic occasionalism does not undermine procedural individualism.

Unfortunately, however, we can not leave the matter there since some philosophers defend a more aggressive version of occasionalism. They argue that languages group objects together in ways which permeate mental content so as to preclude our individuating thoughts, beliefs, or intentions, individualistically. They do not deny that meanings derive from intentions. They deny, rather, that we can individuate intentions solely by reference to facts about the individuals whose

intentions they are. Tyler Burge, for instance, invites us to imagine a Ms Patient who belongs to a community that uses the word “arthritis” to describe rheumatoid diseases of the joints.¹¹ Ms Patient says to us “I have arthritis in my thigh” we explain to her that she is wrong because arthritis occurs only in the joints, and she accepts that she was mistaken. In this case, we would say that Ms Patient believed that she had arthritis in her thigh. Next Burge invites us to imagine a Ms Patient* who is physically and mentally identical to Ms. Patient although she belongs to a linguistic community the members of which use the word “arthritis” to describe rheumatoid diseases of the bones as well as of the joints. Ms Patient* says to us “I have arthritis in my thigh”, but because her utterance makes sense in the language of her linguistic community, we do not tell her that arthritis occurs only in the joints so she is wrong. In this case, we would say that Ms Patient* believed that she had a rheumatoid disease in her thigh, not that Ms Patient* believed that she had arthritis in her thigh. Burge concludes, therefore, that we ascribe different beliefs to Ms Patient and Ms Patient* despite their being physically and mentally identical. More generally, occasionalists such as Burge present us with two individuals who differ solely in their linguistic communities, and who make identical utterances only for us to identify these utterances as expressions of different beliefs or intentions. They conclude, therefore, that we can not individuate an intention solely by reference to the individual concerned. To fix the particular meaning of an utterance for its author, we have to refer to the author’s linguistic community understood as a part of the occasion of its being made.

Occasionalists such as Burge misconstrue the import of their thought experiment. They do so because they fail to distinguish properly between the roles of particular and linguistic meanings in human discourse. Consider again the case of Ms

Patient. She says “I have arthritis in my thigh” because she believes both that she has a rheumatoid disease in her thigh and that the word “arthritis” refers to rheumatoid diseases of the bones. Because these are her beliefs, when she says “I have arthritis in my thigh”, she intends to express the idea “I have a rheumatoid disease in my thigh”, and anyone who so understands her will have understood correctly her particular intention. Occasionalists such as Burge, in contrast, suggest that we would treat her utterance as an expression of the mistaken belief “I have arthritis in my thigh”, and, more surprisingly, that she would accept our doing so. Nonetheless, the fact that we would treat her utterance as such and such does not establish that it is such and such. When we treat her utterance as an expression of a mistaken belief, we treat it in terms of its abstract or linguistic meaning, not the meaning it has by virtue of her particular intention; after all, the conventional meaning of “I have arthritis in my thigh” is “I have arthritis in my thigh”, not “I have a rheumatoid disease in my thigh”. Similarly, when she accepts our treatment of her utterance, she treats it in terms of its abstract linguistic meaning, not its particular meaning for her. Occasionalists such as Burge establish only that we sometimes treat utterances as though their particular meaning was given by their linguistic meaning. They do not establish that particular intentions actually depend on linguistic meanings.

Why do people sometimes treat an utterance whether made by themselves or someone else in terms of its linguistic, not its particular, meaning? People treat utterances in this way because they recognise conventional usage has a certain authority. The authority of linguistic meanings, and the distinction between them and particular ones, appears whenever we talk of someone having said one thing and meant something else. Whenever we do this, we distinguish between what someone said, defined in terms of the authority of the conventional or linguistic meaning of the

utterance, from what he meant, defined in terms of the particular meaning of the utterance. This distinction implies another between two forms of discourse. On the one hand, we have dialogue defined as the form of discourse in which we try to recover intentional meanings without paying homage to the authority of linguistic meanings. On the other hand, we have argument defined as the form of discourse in which we accept the authority of linguistic meanings. When we engage in dialogue, we want to understand other people, so we typically treat their utterances charitably.¹² We try to grasp their particular intentions even if doing so involves our attaching an unconventional meaning to their words. When we engage in argument, we want to show other people to be mistaken, so we treat their utterances uncharitably. We try to hold them to the linguistic meanings of their utterances even if doing so involves our ignoring the particular beliefs they intended to express.

Now we can identify the error made by occasionalists such as Burge. Whereas their thought experiments rely on our treating utterances as we would in argument, their conclusion purportedly applies to how we would treat utterances in dialogue. Whereas their thought experiments rely on our equating the meaning of an utterance with its abstract linguistic meaning, their conclusion purportedly applies to particular intentions. If we treat Ms Patient's utterance as a contribution to an argument, we will hold her to the belief that she has arthritis in her thigh, but we will do so because we will identify the meaning of her utterance with its linguistic meaning, not her intentions. In this case, therefore, the occasionalists have no grounds for applying their conclusion to intentions. Likewise, if we treat Ms Patient's utterance as a contribution to a dialogue, we will concern ourselves with her intentions, but we will take the meaning of her utterance to be that she has a rheumatoid disease in her thigh. In this case, therefore, there is no difference between the beliefs and meanings we

ascribe to Ms Patient and those we ascribe to Ms Patient*. Occasionalists such as Burge fail, therefore, to establish that we can not individuate intentions solely by reference to the individuals whose intentions they are.

Although utterances are made on particular occasions, objective facts about the occasions do not directly influence their meanings. They do not do so because meanings refer to occasions as they are perceived by individuals, not occasions as they really are or as we believe them to be. Imagine, for example, that Peter says “hallelujah lass” in order to indicate the presence of a female member of the Salvation Army, although the woman to whom he refers is not in fact a member of the Salvation Army. Susan will grasp his intention if she recognises he is describing the woman in question as a female member of the Salvation Army. She will understand his intention provided she grasps what he believes about the occasion. Indeed, even if she does not recognise the true nature of the occasion, even if she too believes the woman is a member of the Salvation Army, she still will grasp the meaning of his utterance provided she rightly understands his intention as it expresses his view of the occasion. When we describe an occasion, we fill out the meaning of an utterance only in so far as the author perceived the occasion as we describe it. We can conclude, therefore, that meanings are either intentions or abstractions derived from intentions. When other things, such as the linguistic or economic context of an utterance, enter into a meaning, they do so only indirectly by virtue of their relationship to such intentions. In order to justify this version of intentionalism, however, we had to adopt a weak concept of an intention. We had to conceive of an intention not as the prior purpose of the author, but rather as the meaning an utterance has for a particular individual whether he be its author or reader. The crux of intentionalism is, therefore, procedural individualism.

III

According to procedural individualism, meanings derive from the intentions of specific individuals and can be individuated exclusively by reference to those individuals. I can fill out further this weak version of intentionalism by showing how it avoids the errors widely associated with a stronger version. Strong intentionalists sometimes imply that a text has a meaning only by virtue of the determining will of its author, so to understand what a text says, we must recover what its author meant.¹³

The main difficulties with this argument arise because it assumes texts have temporal meanings. The strong intentionalists are right to insist meanings require the action of the will or mind of a specific individual. Yet because they look for the meaning of a text, they mistakenly focus exclusively on the mind of the author, thereby neglecting the fact that the mind of a reader also can act to determine an meaning. In most other respects, strong intentionalism looks to me rather like a straw man constructed by critics who should be aiming their fire at weak intentionalism but have failed to locate their target. In distinguishing between two varieties of intentionalism, therefore, I am concerned less to distance myself from other intentionalists than to disarm critics who have misunderstood intentionalism.

Procedural individualists and strong intentionalists take different views of authorial intentions. Strong intentionalists typically identify authorial intentions with prior purposes.¹⁴ For example, when authors set out to write a poem expressing sadness, their prior purpose is to write a sad poem; thus, according to strong intentionalists, the meaning of their poems must incorporate a notion of sadness. In this way, strong intentionalists identify the meaning of an utterance with an authorial purpose antecedent to it - first the poets want to write a sad poem, then they do so.

Really, however, because authorial purposes are antecedent to utterances, they must be related only contingently to the meanings utterances have for their authors. Poets might set out to write a sad poem only later to come to look on what they are writing as joyous, and if this happens, their poems will come to have a meaning for them different from their prior purpose. Thus, the New Critics are quite right to condemn strong intentionalism.¹⁵ Prior purposes are related only contingently to the meanings of utterances to their authors, and this implies that they can not be constitutive of meanings. Consider the example of a poet who sets out to write a sad poem but while writing comes to think of it as joyous. It would be a foolish scholar who insisted we understand the meaning of the poem to include a feeling of sadness simply because the original purpose of the author had been to write a sad poem. More generally, prior purposes can not determine the meaning of an utterance for its author because authors often change their minds about what they are doing while they are engaged in the act of writing. Prior purposes have no necessary bearing on the meanings utterances have for their authors, let alone anyone else. They are merely biographical facts about authors.

Procedural individualism avoids the errors in strong intentionalism identified by the New Critics. It does so by equating authorial intentions with the meaning an utterance has for its author rather than the prior purpose of its author.¹⁶ This distinction has two important components. The first is that procedural individualism focuses on the final intentions of authors as they make an utterance. It does not consider the original purpose of authors when they first contemplate making an utterance. For example, if a poet set out to write a sad poem but during the course of writing came to look on what he was writing as a joyous poem, then a description of the meaning of the poem to its author must refer to the final conception of a joyous

poem but it need not refer to the original conception of a sad poem. Of course, it is possible for authors to alter their view of the meaning of their utterances long after they have made them - few people never change their minds. But when this happens, the revised meaning of the utterance to its author will be a meaning to its author as a reader, not as the author. The second important component of the distinction between the meaning of an utterance to its author and the prior purposes of its author is that the former goes beyond a purposive view of authorial intentions to embrace the substantive beliefs of the author. Weak intentions are not reducible to a concern to have a certain effect or to bring about a state of affairs. They incorporate the ideas that animate the actual content of the utterance. For example, if a poet writes a poem describing the sadness felt at the death of a friend, the meaning of the poem to its author might include not only a final intention to express the idea of sadness but also beliefs about the nature of sadness. Weak intentionalism implies that intentional meanings derive from the ideas authors hope to communicate through their utterances.

Procedural individualists and strong intentionalists also differ in their accounts of the conscious nature of authorial intentions. Strong intentionalists identify authorial intentions exclusively with the conscious mind.¹⁷ They imply that authors have infallible knowledge of their own intentions, not just a privileged access to them. Authors must be right about what their utterances mean to them. What is at issue here is not whether or not we should accept every pronouncement authors make about their intentions. Authors might lie deliberately, and even the most virulent intentionalist would not want to perpetuate a lie. What is at issue is, rather, whether or not to know what authors think they intend is to know what they do intend. Strong intentionalists argue that it is. They reduce intentions to conscious intentions. Psychoanalytical theorists, in contrast, argue, quite rightly, that authors might not consciously grasp the

meanings their utterances have even for them. An author's preconscious and unconscious mind can influence what he writes without his being aware of this happening.¹⁸ For a start, authors can be ignorant of certain beliefs expressed by their utterances, and when this is so, a scholar will have to modify the self-understanding of the authors in order to grasp their actual intentions. For example, a literary critic who found frequent allusions to divorce in a poem about the sadness felt on the death of a friend might conclude an essential part of the meaning of the poem to its author consists of certain preconscious beliefs about divorce. More dramatically still, authors can be wrong about the beliefs that inspired their work, and when this happens, a scholar will have to overturn the self-understanding of the authors in order to grasp their actual intentions. For example, a literary critic who found that a poem about the sadness felt on the death of a friend was actually a joyous poem might conclude the poet actually welcomed the death of his friend. Psychoanalytic theorists are quite right, therefore, to condemn strong intentionalism on the grounds that the conscious intentions of authors do not necessarily constitute the meaning of their utterances for themselves, let alone for anyone else.

Procedural individualism avoids the errors in strong intentionalism identified by psychoanalytic theorists. It does so by equating authorial intentions with the meanings utterances have for their authors, and leaving open the question of whether these meanings are conscious, preconscious, or unconscious. Procedural individualism does not commit itself to any particular view of the awareness authors have of their intentions. After all, to say an utterance meant such and such to its author either preconsciously or unconsciously is still to say it meant such and such to its author. Imagine that a literary critic finds constant allusions to divorce in a poem ostensibly about the sadness caused by the death of a friend, and after some

consideration, decides these allusions reflect certain unconscious beliefs of the poet. Clearly the critic is still describing the ideas, and so weak intentions, of the author. The arguments of the psychoanalytic theorists do not impinge on procedural individualism because preconscious and unconscious intentions are still intentions.

Procedural individualists and strong intentionalists disagree not only about the nature of temporal intentions, but also about the relationship of such intentions to historical meanings. Strong intentionalists argue that the meaning of an utterance to its author exhausts its temporal meaning.¹⁹ They say authorial intentions, and authorial intentions alone, constitute temporal meanings. Procedural individualists, in contrast, argue that temporal meanings must exist for specific individuals but not necessarily for authors. According to procedural individualists, utterances can have non-authorial meanings. Moreover, because utterances can have non-authorial meanings, they can come to possess public meanings of greater historical import than the meanings they have for their authors. Imagine that an author intends an utterance to mean one thing but a reader understands it to mean another. When this happens, procedural individualists will say that the utterance meant what the reader understood it to mean, although, of course, it did so for the reader, not the author. The qualification is important. Non-authorial meanings still have to be meanings for specific individuals. We can attribute a non-authorial meaning to an utterance only if we can show someone really did understand it in the relevant way. Moreover, the evidence we give to show someone really did understand it in the relevant way surely must be the writings, or just possibly the actions, of the person concerned. Generally, therefore, we must base any claim that an utterance had a non-authorial meaning on an argument about the authorial meaning of one or more works by the person who understood it in the way they describe. The attribution of a non-authorial meaning to

an utterance typically depends on an analysis of the authorial meaning of at least one other utterance. In this sense at least we might say that all meanings are available to us only as authorial ones.

IV

So, I have defended a procedural individualism according to which a temporal meaning must be either a meaning for a specific person or an abstraction based on such meanings. Unless we are to postulate atemporal, metaphysical meanings, we should accept that meanings always derive ultimately from weak intentions. Once we thus conceive of intentionalism in terms of procedural individualism, rather than the strong thesis with which it has been associated, then we can defend it against the fierce criticisms levelled against it. For a start, we can tie meanings to the intentional or mental activity of specific individuals. In addition, we can traverse all sorts of apparent gaps between authorial intentions and meanings - gaps such as that between prior purpose and performance or that between the conscious and unconscious mind.

Earlier, however, I noted that intentionalism had been criticised not just in terms of such gaps, but also in terms of the difficulties of identifying or even postulating authors for utterances such as the Bible, or a “keep off the grass” sign. Does procedural individualism provide us with theoretical resources with which to respond to these latter criticisms? I want to suggest that it does indeed do so. In particular, procedural individualism insists that texts do not have meanings in themselves but only for specific individuals. It clearly points, therefore, towards a conceptual distinction between the creator of an object - that which causes it to come into being - and the author of an utterance - the person who first ascribes meaningful content to the relevant object. Once we appreciate this distinction, moreover,

procedural individualism will lead us to conclude that any utterance will have both a creator and an author but the two need not be the same.²⁰ To fill out this abstract argument, I want to conclude by seeing how it works in relation to the three types of utterance most commonly thought to lack any author.

Consider first utterances with a composite author or multiple authors. In these cases, we can distinguish between the creators of the individual bits of the utterance, and the author who first collected these bits together in a single utterance. We can distinguish, for example, between the numerous people we suppose to have played an active role in the oral tradition out of which the Iliad emerged and the author or authors who first wrote down and attached a meaning to the particular version with which we are concerned. Of course, if we are interested in a particular component part of an utterance, we might turn our attention to an author other than the author of the whole utterance. No doubt, for example, the author of St John's Gospel was not also the author of the Bible. Similarly, although we standardly ascribe the meaning of a co-authored utterance to all the authors, we might focus on a component part therein that we ascribe to just one of them. Nonetheless, for each utterance, whether it be the whole or a part of a larger whole, we can postulate an author who first ascribed meaning to it.

Consider next very simple utterances that recur as, for instance, with common public notices. Some scholars have argued that notices such as "keep off the grass" do not have authors.²¹ Certainly we might allow that such notices often are created by machines: after all, there is something odd about the idea that they could be created by someone who never sees them nor touches them, such as, say, the person who first put up a notice saying "keep off the grass" or the person who programmed the relevant machine to produce a hundred such notices. Because printing machines can not

ascribe meanings to objects, moreover, we might allow also that the creators of such notices can not be their authors. Nonetheless, we still need not conclude that such notices do not have authors. We can say instead that the author of such a notice is the person who first ascribes meaning to it. In this view, the notice might exist as an object for sometime before someone constitutes it as a meaningful object. The notice as an object is created by a machine. As a meaningful object, however, it is constituted by an author.

Consider finally the case of apparently accidental utterances such as the imagined example of the monkey who types Hamlet.²² Clearly such utterances are closely analogous to the notices just considered. We have the monkey who creates the Hamlet manuscript and Shakespeare who first made any such utterance, but neither seems suitable as an author of the particular manuscript being considered. Rather, we can say that the author is the person who first ascribes meaning to the monkey's manuscript.

In most cases, the author of an utterance will be its creator. In some special cases, however, the creator does not ascribe any meaning to the utterance and so can not be its author. The author of the utterance in these cases is the person who first ascribes meaning to it. Such a conclusion will seem paradoxical only if we follow strong intentionalism in focusing on the conscious, prior purposes of authors. This focus sustains a rigid distinction between author and reader, and also equates authorship with creation. Procedural individualism, in contrast, allows us to see authors and readers as ascribing meaning to an utterance in much the same way, and also to distinguish this ascription of meaning from creation. In this view, therefore, there is nothing paradoxical in the idea that the author of an utterance might be, not its creator, but rather the first reader to ascribe meaning to it.

¹ An earlier version of this essay was published in New Literary History.

² One powerful strand to this criticism which I will not consider is the scepticism found most notably in deconstruction. The sceptics argue that because words are ambiguous or because intentions are unobservable, we can not fix the meaning of an utterance, or recover intentions. Such scepticism, however, implicitly equates knowledge with too strong a sense of certainty. The fact that our view of an author's intention is uncertain or open to revision does not preclude our having valid grounds for holding that view to be an objective one. I have discussed these epistemological issues at length in M. Bevir, "Objectivity in History", History and Theory 33 (1994), 328-44.

³ So, by metaphysics I mean the attempt to acquire knowledge of things supposedly outside of our temporal world. It is possible, of course, to develop a very different historical metaphysics concerned with our temporal world. See, for example, R. Collingwood, An Essay on Metaphysics (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940).

⁴ I have argued this point at length in M. Bevir, "The Errors of Linguistic Contextualism", History and Theory 31 (1992), 276-98.

⁵ On varieties of individualism, see S. Lukes, Individualism (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973).

⁶ The classic exposition of this point is F. de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, ed. C. Bally & A. Sechehaye, trans. W. Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966).

⁷ That linguistic conventions are the products of individuals adopting them has been emphasised by, among others, J. Searle, Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), partic. pp. 16-24.

⁸ Contextualists rightly complain of the dangers of assuming otherwise. See, most famously, Q. Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas”, in J. Tully, ed., Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), pp. 29-67.

⁹ For something very like a language-x, see Michel Foucault's account of epistemes as “historical aprioris” that exist in time in a world free of subjectivity. M. Foucault, The Order of Things, (London: Routledge, 1989), partic. pp. xx-xxii.

¹⁰ H. Putnam, “Meaning of Meaning” in Philosophical Papers, Vol. 2: Mind, Language, and Reality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 215-71.

¹¹ T. Burge, “Individualism and the Mental”, in P. French, T. Uehling, Jr, & H. Wettstein, eds., Midwest Studies in Philosophy, vol. 4: Studies in Metaphysics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), pp. 73-121.

¹² To say this is not to subscribe to any particular account of how we should treat utterances charitably. In particular, it is not to accept Davidson's principle of charity, for which see D. Davidson, “Radical Interpretation”, “Belief and the Basis of Meaning”, & “Thought and Talk”, all in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 125-39, 141-54, & 155-70.

¹³ E. Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1967). Many critics have objected to Hirsch's famous defence of a strong intentionalism based on his claim that “if the meaning of the text is not the author's, then no interpretation can possibly correspond to the meaning of a text, since the text can have no determinate or determinable meaning” (p.5). Elsewhere, however, he has claimed that “the nature of the text is to have no meaning except that which an interpreter wills into existence.” See E. Hirsch, “Three Dimensions of Hermeneutics”,

New Literary History 3 (1972) 246. If we take this latter claim as a gloss on the former, then his position actually looks remarkably like the weak intentionalism I am defending rather than the strong intentionalism his critics ascribe to him.

¹⁴ One source of an equation of authorial intentions with prior purposes seems to be the interest of literary critics in the emotional effects authors hope their works will have. See I. Richards, Practical Criticism (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1929), partic. pp. 180-83.

¹⁵ W. Wimsatt & M. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy" in W. Wimsatt, The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), pp. 3-18.

¹⁶ Quentin Skinner has made a closely related distinction between an intention *in* doing something and an intention *to* do something, where the former, but not the latter, enters into the meaning of an utterance. See, in particular, Q. Skinner, "Motives, Intentions, and the Interpretation of Texts", in Tully, ed., Meaning and Context, pp. 68-78. The difference between my distinction and his is that my weak intentions incorporate beliefs, whereas his intentions in doing something also centre on the illocutionary force of an utterance. The basis of this difference is not that I want to exclude all desires from the intentional aspect of an action, but rather that I do not think such desires enter into the meaning of a work.

¹⁷ Actually intentionalists often emphasise the importance of the preconscious and unconscious. See, for example, Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation, pp. 51-7. Likewise, although Skinner initially argued historians could not overturn any statement authors made about their intentions - Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding", p. 40 - he soon rejected this view and began to allow for the possibility not only of preconscious

intentions but also unconscious ones - Skinner, "Motives, Intentions, and the Interpretation of Texts", pp. 76-7.

¹⁸ A currently influential, psycho-analytic approach to hermeneutics derives from J. Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" & "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud", in Ecrits: A Selection, trans. A. Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publishers, 1977), pp. 30-113 & 146-78.

¹⁹ It is true that theological concerns led many early hermeneutic theorists to tie the correct interpretation of an utterance to its original meaning, understood in terms of either its author alone or its author and his particular linguistic community. See especially F. Schleiermacher, Hermeneutics: The Hand Written Manuscripts, ed. H. Kimmerle, trans. J. Duke & J. Forstman (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977), partic. p. 68. Nonetheless, later intentionalists have been considerably more circumspect about such matters. See, for example, Hirsch, "Three Dimensions", 247.

²⁰ I am assuming that the definition of an utterance includes the idea of being considered meaningful. Of course, there could be utterance-like objects that are not considered meaningful but will be in the future, and these objects currently would have creators but not authors.

²¹ For the claim that texts have authors only if they can be interpreted in numerous ways, see A. Nehamas, "What an Author Is", Journal of Philosophy 83 (1986), 685.

²² Accidental utterances also would include the computer-generated ones invoked against intentionalism by G. Dickie, Aesthetics: An Introduction (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), partic. p. 112.