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# A Defense of "Extreme" Intentionalism

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***Abstract:*** *Intentionalism is a theory about the interpretation of artworks, particularly literary works. In this essay, I defend a form of intentionalism according to which the intentions of authors are both necessary and sufficient to fix the meaning of their literary works. In the first part, I offer brief definitions of intentions, interpretation, and work-meaning. Second, I defend E. D. Hirsch's argument for the necessity condition. Finally, I argue that prominent objections to the sufficiency condition fail.*

***Key Words:*** *E. D. Hirsch, hermeneutics, intentionalism, interpretation, philosophy of literature*

> … what matters, the point of language or speech or whatever you want to call it, is communication, getting across to someone else what you have in mind by means of words that they interpret (understand) as you want them to. Speech has endless other purposes, but none underlies this one.[1]

Intentionalism is a theory about the interpretation of artworks, particularly literary works. The strongest of its proponents subscribe to the view that authors' intentions are both necessary and sufficient to fix the meaning of their works.[2] It follows from such a view that interpreters of a work will arrive at the *correct* interpretation of a work if and only if they recognize the author's intentions.[3] Hence, intentionalism is a view both about what determines (or fixes) the meaning of a work and about the conditions under which an interpretation is correct.

[1] Donald Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," in *The Philosophy of Michael Dummett*, ed. Brian McGuinness and Gianluigi Oliveri (Kluwer, 1994), 11.

[2] "Extreme" intentionalists include William Irwin and Kathleen Stock. See William Irwin, *Intentionalist Interpretation: A Philosophical Explanation and Defense* (Greenwood, 1999); and Kathleen Stock, *Only Imagine: Fiction, Interpretation, and Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

[3] "… the meaning of an utterance is explicated in terms of the speaker's intention to reveal to an auditor that the speaker intends the auditor to respond in a certain way" (Noel Carroll, "Art, Intention, and Conversation," in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger [Temple University Press, 1992], 157).



Competing intentionalist views suggest that though an author's intentions are necessary to fix the meaning of a work, they are not sufficient. Even if the author's intention is recognized, when an author fails to intend a possible conventionally established meaning, the meaning is either undetermined or is fixed by conventions and perhaps the context of utterance.[4]

In this essay, I will defend an extreme form of intentionalism according to which the intentions of the author are both necessary and sufficient to determine (or fix) the meaning of a literary work. In the first section, I explain the significance of the issue for theological studies. Second, I will provide some definitions for the key terms: meaning, intentions, and interpretation. Third, I will defend the view that an author's intentions are necessary to fix the meaning of a work. Support for this position is found in the case provided by E. D. Hirsch. Finally, I reply to the main objections to the view that an author's intentions are sufficient to fix the meaning of a work, thus clearing the way for the extreme view.

## Significance for Theology

In the face of new critical theories and other post-modernist ideas, evangelicals have played a significant role in successfully defending the necessity of discerning authorial intent for accurately interpreting the Bible.[5] The effect is impressive. It would perhaps be surprising to see a defense of an alternative view in a text on hermeneutics supported by an evangelical seminary professor.[6] So, it might seem unnecessary to rehash arguments in its favor. Nonetheless, rehashing is a worthwhile task even if its need is not felt. Afterall, the weakest points of a set of views are often the ones with the widest agreement. If there is not an immediate need to defend it, we might just forget why we believe it.

[4] Modest intentionalists include Noel Carroll, "Art, Intention, and Conversation," in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger (Temple University Press, 1992); and E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (Yale University Press, 1967). Another view is *hypothetical* intentionalism according to which an interpreter aims to arrive at the most justifiable interpretation of a hypothetical author (rather than the actual author).

[5] For example, Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Zondervan, 1998).

[6] Walter Kaiser, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (Zondervan, 2007); William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (Zondervan, 2017); Robert Plummer, *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Kregel, 2021); Grant R. Osborne. *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (IVP Academic, 2006).

Further, as Kathleen Stock comments, there is widespread opposition to intentionalist views of interpretation in both literature and philosophy departments in the wider academy.[7] It would be unwise to assume none of those influences will have any effect on biblical studies departments outside the more liberal schools.[8] Indeed, Kevin Vanhoozer warns of the "tendency of professional readers to profess types of criticism that either read against the grain of or overrule the author's communicative intentions."[9] Such a tendency is not merely limited to literature departments. It affects the direction of biblical studies departments as well.

The significance to the theological task is (at least) twofold. First, intentionalist theories entail a set of strategies for interpretation. If one is interested only in a valuable personal experience from reading, one would not necessarily be as concerned with the interests of the author.[10] In contrast, the intentionalist aims at discovering the interests of the author even if one cannot find anything applicable to the reader. Hence, the effect of adopting intentionalist views of meaning-fixing has far-reaching effects on biblical studies.

Second, interpretation is tied to the doctrine of inerrancy. Ordinarily, when discussing the truth of Scripture—its inerrancy—we are talking about the relation of what Scripture says to states of affairs in the world.[11] But according to the doctrine of inerrancy, what is claimed to be true is whatever was asserted by the author.[12] When we refer to inerrancy of Scripture, we are talking about the *correct* interpretation of Scripture.[13] We are not talking about any interpretation. Intentionalism is a view that provides a theory of what makes a correct interpretation.

[7] Kathleen Stock, *Only Imagine: Fiction, Interpretation, and Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 14.

[8] See also Vanhoozer's comments to similar effect: Kevin Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically* (Zondervan, 2024), 5.

[9] Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, 324.

[10] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 181.

[11] "We AFFIRM that the Bible expresses God's truth in propositional statements, and we declare that biblical truth is both objective and absolute. We further affirm that a statement is true if it represents matters as they actually are, but is an error if it misrepresents the facts" ("The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," *JETS* 25 [1982]: 398).

[12] "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," 400. See also, Paul Feinberg, "The Meaning of Inerrancy," in *Inerrancy,* ed. Norm Geisler (Zondervan, 1979), 297.

[13] That is not to say that we must know the correct interpretation, only that, whatever the correct interpretation, it is true.



## Meaning

In order to defend intentionalism, some definitions must be supplied. Many debates between the holders of various views depend on how one defines "meaning," "intentions," "authors," and "interpretations." But to make a case one needs some idea of the concepts involved.

The term *meaning* has a variety of senses. In this context, I am using it to speak about the meaning of literary works. A literary work is a set of linguistic items—words, phrases, and sentences organized into paragraphs. A work may include all sorts of other items such as repetitions, allusions, and alike, all of which are selected and arranged by its author. For each level of organization of a work, "meaning" has a different sense. A word has a sense and reference.[14] A sentence can have truth conditions, but a word cannot. A work has a meaning in virtue of the selection and arrangement of sentences to produce an overall meaning. The meaning of a work involves a hierarchy of sentence meanings and an arrangement of content to produce main themes, sub-themes, theses, claims, or arguments.

It is important to note that while intentionalism is a theory of *what fixes* the meaning of a literary work (and perhaps other artworks), it is not itself a theory of meaning. One can adopt a range of theories for the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences.[15]

## Interpretation

The term *interpretation* has two senses. First, interpretation can mean a psychological process, involving a complex mental activity of assessing the relative importance of sentences, summarizing long passages, elaborating for comprehension, and noticing logical implications.[16] Second, interpretation can mean a set of statements about the meaning of a work. According to this sense, an interpretation is the *product* of an interpretive process.

As a product, an interpretation is not merely a translation, a *re*statement of a work.[17] An actor can learn the lines of a poem in his language,

[14] Gottlob Frege, "On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*," in *The Frege Reader,* ed. Michael Beaney (Blackwell, 1997), 151–71.

[15] I locate the present discussion in the *pragmatics* of language rather than a study of its *semantics* or *syntax*. For help with this distinction see chapter 7 of Gary Kemp, *What Is This Thing Called Philosophy of Language?* (Routledge, 2018), 120–35.

[16] Walter Kintsch and Tuen Van Deijk, "Toward a Model of Text Comprehension and Production," *Psychological Review* 85 (1978): 363.

[17] Donald Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 129–30.

translate them into another, and recite the translation without knowing what the poem is about. In contrast, an interpretation is the result of an activity in which the interpreter attempts to state what authors mean by what they say.

Further, interpretations are produced for desired ends. When approaching a single object, two different interpreters may have different aims. For example, one person may be looking for a satisfying experience, the other, the author's intended meaning. Bible studies are often composed of conversations split between various aims. One person wonders what Paul meant by a phrase, another, how the passage helps her spiritual walk, still another, the significance of certain poetic constructions.

Moreover, for the intentionalist, the property of a literary work of primary interest is the *intentional semantic content* of a work. Unique to utterances is their possession of cognitive or semantic content. I do not mean anything semantic by intentionally going to the fridge to get some food, whereas John does when he asserts "Suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them!" (John 20:19 NLT). One cannot translate the action of going to the fridge into another language while one can translate John's sentence into French or Chinese.[18] All that is not to say that there are no other aspects of a work that are of interest. It is only to say that some properties of objects are intended to convey semantic content and that a correct interpretation of a literary work requires knowing what those properties are.

Nor must we ignore non-intentional properties of a work. Rather, the intentionalist contends that intentional semantic properties are what yield a *correct interpretation of a work*. For example, one might be interested in the effects of a work on a reader. Although such a study would be of interest, there is no normative aspect to the answer. One might be able discern what a correct effect might be by reference to what effect the author intended, but *merely* studying a work's effects would not automatically yield that result.

Part of the intentionalist case must not only be to *prefer* one aim over another, but a defense of a *proper aim,* at least for certain kinds of objects. The latter contention indicates that some objects have properties in virtue of which an interpretation has a proper aim. This leaves open as to whether all objects have such properties. There may be a proper aim for some and not for others.

Finally, interpretation is a rational activity performed with reference to an artifact, in this case a literary work. Some have suggested that interpretation is not a rational activity. Instead, it is merely a causal interaction

[18] One can, of course, translate a *description* of an action given in one language into another language.



between an object and a person or a community of persons. We may be able to describe what occurs when we interpret, but we cannot assess the rational merits of an interpretation. Nor can we be objective. Consequently, assessing an interpretation amounts to measuring its continuity to a particular tradition, or its benefits to a community, not whether one can provide sufficient evidence to support one interpretation over another.

Although a discussion of such views would take us further afield, a brief criticism of such views is worth making. The view assumes that though we have epistemic access to how things appear to us, we cannot objectively assess one view over another. Our perspectives are determined by our psychological dispositions, social conditioning, and our autobiographies. Since we cannot "climb out" of our perspectives, we cannot be objective. This claim is false for it fails to recognize the distinction between *possessing* a perspective and *applying* it.[19] An interpreter can possess a host of psychological, sociological, and autobiographical conditions but not apply them in a given interpretive situation. If so, then the interpreter is not forced to apply her perspective when considering the merits of a variety of interpretations of a work.

## Intentions

An authored literary work is produced by an agent who has intentionally selected and arranged its linguistic materials. Crucially, the work is the result of the author's intentional actions. An intention is a mental state that explains an action and any resulting product. For example, a person can be hungry and believe that there is food in the fridge. As a result, he intends to visit the fridge. When he does so, one can infer from his actions that he intended to get some food from the fridge. Similarly, John can believe that Jesus Christ died and was raised from the dead (having witnessed the events), desire to inform others about these events, and believe that writing the good news in a book will convince his reader that the events occurred. John can form the intention to inform his reader and write his Gospel. Importantly, the author can intend the reader to recognize his intentions by reading his work. Recognizing those intentions from examining his Gospel is the aim of an intentionalist interpretation.

Further, intentions are not necessarily discernable either by readers or by authors. A reader may fail to recognize what the author intended to say. And it is even the case that an author can fail to recognize her own

[19] Israel Scheffler, *Science and Subjectivity* (Hackett, 1982), 37–39. Cf. John Feinberg, *Can You Believe It's True? Christian Apologetics in a Modern and Postmodern Era* (Crossway, 2013), 117–22.

intentions. Perhaps she forgets what she meant by saying something. Intentionalism does not rest upon successful interpretations. Rather, it rests on the conditions for there being a successful (i.e., correct) interpretation. Whether we arrive at a correct interpretation is not relevant to the issue of whether there is one.

### Support for the Necessary Condition

Perhaps the most well-known proponent of the intentionalist view is E. D. Hirsch. Hirsch argues that if one rejects the intentionalist view, then it cannot be possible to arrive at a correct interpretation: "once the author had been ruthlessly banished as the determiner of his text's meaning, it very gradually appeared that no adequate principle existed for judging the validity of an interpretation."[20] The gist of Hirsch's argument is as follows:

1. If the author does not determine the meaning of a text, there can be no correct interpretation of the text.
2. There can be a correct interpretation of the text.
3. Hence, the author determines the meaning of a text.

In defense of (1), Hirsch argues that, for any word sequence, there are an array of potential meanings. If no one chooses a meaning, a word sequence cannot actually mean one of its potential meanings. Hence, if a word sequence has an actual meaning, someone must choose to mean something by it.[21] Even if the range of possible meanings is constrained by conventions, there remains no correct interpretation as long as those conventions admit multiple possible meanings. He writes,

> [N]o mere sequence of words can represent an actual verbal meaning with reference to public norms alone …. Under the public norms of language alone no … adjudications can occur, since the array of possibilities presents a face of blank indifference. The array of possibilities only begins to become a more selective system of probabilities when, instead of confronting merely a word sequence, we also posit a speaker who very likely means something.

[20] Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation,* 3.

[21] "Meaning is an affair of consciousness not of words. Almost any word sequence can, under the conventions of language legitimately represent more than one complex of meaning. A word sequence means nothing in particular until somebody either means something by it or understands something from it. There is no magic land of meanings outside of human consciousness" (Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation,* 4).



> Then and only then does the most usual sense of the word sequence become the most probable … sense.[22]

Someone might wonder why a work could not have a determinate meaning in virtue of its sequence. To fill out his argument, we might begin by restating a part of the first argument. That is, for any word sequence, there are an array of possible meanings. At this point, an array of possibilities would not render anything probable. That is because it is an analytic truth that if one of the possible meanings is more probable than another, it is more likely to be correct than another. It follows that if one of the possible meanings is the correct meaning, it must be the actual meaning. An agent is required to actualize one of those possible meanings.

Now the question becomes: who is the agent? There are only two possible answers: the author or the reader. Contra to the reader-response advocates, readers do not get to be the meaning-fixers of texts. Consequently, the only option available is to consider the intentions of the author as the final authority.

Hirsch argues that the meaning of works must be reproducible. But if there is no such thing as *the* meaning of a work, then we could not "share" meanings with one another.[23] Suppose that there is not a determinate meaning. Hirsch argues that if there is no determinate meaning in a text, there is nothing to reproduce. To reproduce a text is to put it in your own words to explain its meaning. But if there is nothing to reproduce, then no one can reproduce it. If so, then no one else could understand it (it could not be shared). Sharing is an activity that can only occur if there is something to share. Indeterminacy renders the activity impossible.

### The Intentional Fallacy

According to a famous objection, intentionalists commit the 'intentional fallacy.'[24] One must discover a sufficient biography of an author to understand any of his texts. But we do not need a comprehensive biography of an author to understand his texts. Hence, the intentions of the

[22] Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 225.

[23] "If meaning were not reproducible, it could not be actualized by someone else and therefore could not be understood or interpreted. Determinacy on the other hand is a quality of meaning required in order that there be something to reproduce. Determinacy is a necessary attribute of any shareable meaning, since an indeterminacy cannot be shared: if a meaning were indeterminate, it would have no boundaries, no self-identity, and therefore could have no identity with a meaning entertained by someone else" (Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 44).

[24] W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Sewanee Review* 54 (1946): 468–88.

author are not what fixes the meaning of the text.

However, intentionalists do not say that we must somehow get behind the work to the psychology of its author. Instead, the intentionalist says that one can know what the author intended by examining the text. It is not part of the intentionalist view that we must have an extensive biography of the author to know what an author meant to say.

Further, intentionalists recognize that intentional utterances are embedded in cultural practice. As Ludwig Wittgenstein points out, one does not first form an intention to say something and then think about the language in which one will say it. One has the intention *in the language one uses*. He writes, "An intention is embedded in its situation, in human customs and institutions.… In so far as I do intend the construction of a sentence in advance, that is made possible by the fact that I can speak the language in question."[25] It follows that interpreters can discern intentions from the work itself. Although evidence for the meaning of a work from biography may help, the text itself can provide evidence of an author's intention. Hence, the objection fails.

### The Problem of Authorless Texts

Let me now turn to a couple of further objections from Monroe Beardsley. In his first objection, Beardsley asks to consider a text without an author. Surely such a text would have a range of meanings, some of which are better than others. But then, having a correct meaning does not require an author. Beardsley writes, "Some texts that have been formed without the agency of an author, and hence, without authorial meaning, nevertheless have a meaning and can be interpreted."[26]

It may be the case that there are texts without authors (the most impressive example is text produced by computers). However, is it the case that texts produced without authors have determinate meanings? It is not clear that they can. A determinate meaning is the correct meaning. If no meaning has been determined by an author, then there is no *correct* meaning. One may interpret a computer's poetry any way one likes or by considering the conventions of a given linguistic community. It is not as if one could interpret an authorless text incorrectly. As Hirsch suggests, there is no other way a text could have a correct actual meaning if it is not

[25] L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Pearson, 1973), § 337. Cf. John Feinberg, "Truth: Relationship of Theories of Truth with Hermeneutics," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible: Papers from ICBI Summit II*, ed. Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus (Academie, 1984), 37.

[26] Monroe Beardsley, "The Authority of the Text," in *Intention and Interpretation,* ed. Gary Iseminger (Temple University Press, 2010), 25.



fixed by a conscious agent. Hence, any text that has no author has no correct interpretation. Computers just are not the kinds of things that form intentions. Hence, a computer cannot mean something by what it says.[27]

### Dead Author Objection

Another of Beardsley's objections suggests that the meanings of texts can change over time, even beyond the death of the author. At least those changes cannot be a result of the intentions of the author. Hence, intentionalism is false. He writes, "The meaning of a text can change after its author has died. But the author cannot change his meaning after he has died. Therefore, the textual meaning is not identical to the authorial meaning."[28]

The argument assumes that the determinate meanings of texts can be changed.[29] But that is false. One is not changing the meaning of a dead author's work. One is misinterpreting the text (or perhaps creating a new one). This is even true when an author changes his or her own interpretation of something she previously wrote. She is either misinterpreting her work or creating a different work. She is not changing the meaning of the work as she originally wrote it. The significance of a text, even to its author, is not the same as the meaning of a text. A text has the meaning it has in virtue of what the author meant to say at the time of writing.

### Humpty Dumptyism

Many are prevented from holding to the more extreme view because it seems to entail that there are no constraints on authors. Authors can use words and sentences any way they want. The view has been referred to as "Humpty Dumptyism" after a scene in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* in which Humpty Dumpty tries to persuade Alice that he can make any word mean whatever he wants.[30] Now, no one in his right mind wants to belong to a philosophical camp called "Humpty Dumptyism." However, as I shall argue, the more extreme view is much more

[27] That a computer cannot intentionally perform an action (it has no beliefs or desires) does not entail that an agent cannot say something by what has been produced. An A.I. may generate a company memo, which is then selected and arranged by the C.E.O. and sent to its recipients. But the A.I. itself cannot be an *author* in the sense I have supplied.

[28] Beardsley, "The Authority of the Text," 26.

[29] For a similar argument, see Berys Gaut, "Interpreting the Arts: The Patchwork Theory," *The Journal for Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993): 600.

[30] Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (Clarkson N. Potter, 1960), 268–70.

palatable than its detractors make out.

The Humpty Dumpty objection is subject to an often-missed reply. As Michael Hancher points out, one should take into account the context of the scene in the work. Things work backwards in the fictional world inhabited by Alice and Humpty Dumpty. For example, the Queen cries *prior* to pricking her finger. And Humpty Dumpty uses his terms before defining them. If he had inhabited a world where things happen in the right order, he would have *stipulated* that he would use "glory" to mean knock-down argument prior to using the term. Nonetheless, stipulate his use he does.[31] Hence, he *can* use any word to mean anything he wants. So can we. And we do it all the time. Stipulation is a common enough practice.

In the Humpty Dumpty case, I am inclined to think Hancher is correct. Hence, it is not a troubling case of Humpty Dumptyism. Nonetheless, it is quite possible to imagine a more troubling case. For example, Sherri Irvin asks us to suppose an author writes *cauliflower* instead of *broccoli* by mistake. According to the intentionalist, if an author writes *cauliflower* when he means to write *broccoli*, and the meaning of the text is determined by his intentions, then *cauliflower* means *broccoli*. But this is absurd. Hence, the author's intentions are not sufficient to determine the meaning of the text.[32]

Take another example. Suppose an author writes *righteous indigestion* when he meant *righteous indignation*.[33] Since the meaning of the text is determined by the author's intention, *indigestion* means *indignation*. But we would not say this about any other activity. For example, if a pole vaulter fails to vault over the pole, we would not count it as a success even though we recognize the vaulter's intent to get over the pole.[34]

In reply, the intentionalist can argue that there is nothing absurd about *cauliflower* being used to mean *broccoli*. For one thing, when a speaker misspeaks, interpreters often recognize a speaker's intention and thereby correctly interpret what is said. Second, the mistake is not necessarily a failure to utter. Rather it is a failure to accord one's choices with conventions, how we usually use words and sentences. But that does not entail that speakers have necessarily failed to mean anything by their utterances.

Some of the objection rests on a misunderstanding of the extreme

[31] Michael Hancher, "Humpty Dumpty and Verbal Meaning," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 40 (1981): 50.

[32] Sherri Irvin, "Authors, Intentions and Literary Meaning," *Philosophy Compass* 2 (2006): 116.

[33] Beardsley, "The Authority of the Text," 26.

[34] Irvin, "Authors, Intentions and Literary Meaning," 116.



view. As Kathleen Stock argues, extreme intentionalists are not committed to the view that conventions are irrelevant to interpretation, only that authors do not always abide by them. Sometimes they use words and sentences in ways that deviate from conventional use.[35] Hence, interpreters do not have to split the difference by saying that when intentions match conventions, intentions determine the meaning, but when they do not, conventions take over.[36] Once one distinguishes between what an author means by uttering and what utterances mean in the speaker's language, the objection dissolves.[37]

Further, as William Irwin argues, intentionalists are not committed to the view that speakers (and writers) can make anything mean whatever they want *no matter what*. For example, one cannot *merely will* something to occur and thereby form an intention.[38] To merely will does not on its own produce an intention. One can want someone to understand without believing that anyone could understand. If one lacks such a belief, then one cannot intend anyone to understand.

More controversially, it is not a necessary condition on an intention that the speaker *is justified* in believing that he will be understood. A speaker neither must be in possession of a reason to think she will be understood, nor must it be the case that she will be understood.

Someone might object by suggesting that such a denial allows for an *irrational* belief, one not grounded (or groundable) in any reason. One might suggest that misspeaking is a case in which the speaker *cannot* expect to be understood. How is an interpreter supposed to know that the

[35] "Speaker meaning normally (and intentionally) makes use of conventional sentence meaning. However, speaker meaning is not wholly determined by those meanings: it may deviate from them" (Stock, *Only Imagine,* 38). Irony and conversational implicature are two examples of deviation.

[36] A moderate intentionalist may hold to such a view. For example, Iseminger argues that the meaning of a work is "a *function* of … *utterer's meaning which is compatible with the meaning of the word-sequence uttered*" ("Actual vs. Hypothetical Intentionalism," 322). Stock replies that, according to the intentionalist, "Appealing to the conventional meanings of a sentence when uttered by a particular speaker *is a way of* recovering the speaker's speaker meaning (her intentions). However, as with irony, it is *not the only way*" (*Only Imagine,* 39).

[37] Elmar Geir Unnsteinsson, "Wittgenstein as a Gricean Intentionalist," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 24 (2016): 164. Intentionalists can be committed to a fairly strong sense of the literal meaning of sentences. As Paul Helm argues, literal meaning—the ordinary use of a sentence in a group of language users—will be the standard by which we judge any deviation ("The Role of Logic in Biblical Interpretation," 849).

[38] William Irwin, "Authorial Declaration and Extreme Actual Intentionalism: Is Dumbledore Gay?" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 73 (2015): 144.

speaker meant broccoli by cauliflower? Hence, the speaker cannot mean broccoli by *cauliflower*. It would follow from allowing irrational expectations that a set of random sounds could mean anything the speaker wants as long as he has the (irrational) expectation to be understood. But surely garbled sounds do not mean anything no matter what the speaker intends.[39]

One response is to deny that anyone could have such a belief. *I* could not speak gibberish to a class and genuinely believe that they could understand me. Nonetheless, there are (either imaginary or real) cases that produce scenarios in which such a belief is possible. Suppose I have undergone brain surgery. I am left unable to speak in a recognizable way. Nonetheless, from my point of view, I am speaking exactly as I did prior to surgery. From my perspective, I am using my words according to the way most others do. Consequently, I expect to be understood. Suppose whenever I utter cauliflower, I believe I am talking about broccoli. It follows that if I genuinely expect to be understood, then those sounds have the meaning I intend even though as a matter of fact no one could understand me.

Of course, one cannot intend someone else to do something if one also believes that that person cannot do it. I cannot intend my son to fly across the lake. Why? Because I believe he is not a flyer. Such a constraint generalizes to all intentions: one cannot intend an occurrence one believes cannot occur. Hence, I cannot intend to tell you anything by my utterances if I believe no one could possibly understand them.

In sum, when authors intend to mean something by what they write, they must not have the belief that they cannot be understood by anyone.[40] Hence, as Donald Davidson points out, "you can change the meaning

[39] Irwin embraces irrational beliefs as sufficient for forming an intention. Stock does not. Stock implies that a work cannot be produced by rationally impaired authors. In so doing, she makes space for the kind of text that does not constitute a work (or utterance) (*Only Imagine,* 42). This is the kind of category deployed by less extreme intentionalists for more cases of apparent misspeaking. For example, Iseminger argues that when there is no compatibility between what a sentence ordinarily means and what an author intends it to mean, we "do not have an utterance (or a work)." As such what we have is a text with no correct meaning as one might find in "sound-play, computer generated texts, 'automatic' writing" ("Actual Intentionalism vs. Hypothetical Intentionalism," 322).

[40] It might be pointed out that a writer may use a language known only to himself. In such a case an author can form an intention because he can believe that he, the reader, will be able to understand what he, the author, has written (cf. Stock, *Only Imagine,* 39).



provided you believe (and perhaps are justified in believing) that the interpreter has adequate clues for the new interpretation."[41]

By supplying a condition on intentions, intentionalists can reply that if Humpty Dumpty does not intend to tell Alice what he means by the term, "glory," and consequently believes that Alice could not understand what he means, he cannot fix the meaning of what he says.[42] Similarly, I cannot intend my son to fly across the lake if I believe that he is not able to do it. As Keith Donnellan writes,

> Humpty Dumpty thinks that he invests a word with meaning simply by using it with the intention that it shall mean that. But then it seems that it should be irrelevant to him *what* word he uses. I think this line of reasoning contains a mistake. No such consequence really follows.… [T]he intention cannot be fulfilled.… [T]hey are essentially connected with expectations. Ask someone to flap his arms with the intention of flying. In response he can certainly wave his arms up and down.… But this is not to do it with the intention of flying.… I cannot credit [Humpty Dumpty] with that intention any more than I could credit a seemingly rational adult with the intention to fly when I see him flapping his arms up and down.[43]

In cases in which an author does not believe that an interpreter will understand, an intention cannot be formed.

## No Malapropisms?

Robert Stecker argues that on the extreme intentionalist view, there are no malapropisms. A malapropism occurs when there is a "divergence between intended meaning and utterance meaning."[44] In contrast, Stecker argues that misspeaking involves a failure of utterance. Even if an interpreter can come to understand a misspeaker, such a phenomenon "does not imply that the speaker has said what she intends to say or that her utterance means what she intends to communicate."[45]

Suppose a speaker uses *cauliflower* to mean *broccoli*. Nonetheless, the

[41] Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," in *Truth and Interpretation: The Philosophy of Donald Davidson,* ed. Ernest LaPore (Blackwell, 1986), 258.

[42] William Irwin, "Authorial Declaration," 144.

[43] Keith Donnellan, "Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again," *The Philosophical Review* 77 (1968): 211–13. See also Stock, *Only Imagine,* 88.

[44] Sherri Irvin "Authors, Intentions and Literary Meaning," *Philosophy Compass* 2 (2006): 116.

[45] Robert Stecker, *Interpretation and Construction: Art, Speech, and the Law* (Blackwell, 2003), 13.

speaker's interpreters recognize the speaker's intention for them to understand the speaker to be talking about broccoli. Perhaps the speaker points at the dish of broccoli when he says *cauliflower*. In such cases, the *accidental successful misspeaker* misspeaks but successfully communicates his intended meaning.[46]

Suppose, someone says, "oh, you mean broccoli." In such a case a speaker will likely accept that he has misspoken but will probably deny that he cannot expect anyone to understand. He would likely say, "well, I know I misspoke, but everyone understood what I meant." Stecker's point is that such a response by the speaker is mistaken if extreme intentionalists are correct. There can be no misspeaking on such a view.

The intentionalist can reply that, in such a case, misspeaking boils down to *could have said it better,* but it does not entail *failure to communicate.*[47] Strictly speaking, misspeaking, in this case, amounts to *would have said it better if I could say it again,* but it does not amount to a failure to utter what one means.[48] Hence, a speaker's admission of misspeaking is not an admission of failing to say what is meant, but failing to use the most effective words. As Davidson points out, it is not clear that the interpreter has not given the word used all the powers ordinarily (according to convention) given to another. The interpreter gives *cauliflower* all the powers ordinarily

[46] Such a phenomenon is ubiquitous. We all get by with misspeaking and mostly understand others when they use incorrect words. Almost always is it the case that interpreters are given enough clues from the context to interpret correctly. But the correct interpretation comes down to recognizing the author's intended meaning.

[47] Irvin claims that there is still a failure of utterance even if communication is successful. Analogously, an intention of a pole vaulter to vault a pole does not guarantee success even when the audience recognizes the vaulter's intention. "Even if the vaulter's intention to mount the bar is perfectly obvious, this does not make the vault successful" (Irvin, "Authors, Intentions and Literary Meaning," 116–17). At this point, the analogy does not hold. For someone to recognize what a speaker meant by what he has uttered is to successfully communicate. When the reader recognizes the intention of the speaker, the speaker has succeeded in "vaulting the pole." The analogy would be better if the vaulter used a shovel instead of a pole but managed to get over the bar anyway. A speaker who accidentally uses the wrong words (according to their statistically regular use) can still somehow manage to get over the bar. For example, a speaker with severely limited vocabulary and syntax may still manage to succeed in communicating what he means to say.

[48] Stock, *Only Imagine,* 89.



bestowed on the word *broccoli*.[49]

Further, consider an *intentional successful misspeaker*. A poet or writer of considerable literary skill can use language in a novel way to get across what she means. She can intentionally misspeak. But when she does so, we do not think of her as actually *mis*speaking, failing to say what she intends to say. Instead, her creative use of words and phrases are considered literarily meritorious. What this case shows is that we are really talking about understanding, not utterance. In the case of an accidental misspeaker who gets away with it, we do not have a case of a failure to mean anything. We have a case of making it less likely to be understood.[50] But in neither case do we have a failure to utter. Hence, Stecker's objection fails.[51]

Suppose, however, neither the speaker nor the interpreter recognizes that the speaker has used *cauliflower* to mean broccoli. That is to say, the speaker accidentally says cauliflower when he meant broccoli, and the interpreter does not recognize the speaker's intention to communicate broccoli and thinks the speaker meant cauliflower by saying cauliflower. Call this the *accidental unsuccessful misspeaker*. Neither the speaker nor the interpreter recognizes what has occurred. In such a case, communication has failed.

The question is: could the speaker possess the belief that he will be

[49] "Someone who grasps the fact that Mrs. Malaprop means 'epithet' when she says 'epitaph' must give 'epithet' all the powers 'epitaph' has for many other people" (Davidson, "A Nice Derangement," 262).

[50] "The speaker may or may not … know that he has got away with anything; the interpreter may or may not know that the speaker intended to get away with anything. What is common to the cases is that the speaker expects to be, and is, interpreted as the speaker intended although the interpreter did not have a correct theory in advance.… There is not word or construction that cannot be converted to a new use by an ingenious or ignorant speaker" (Davidson, "A Nice Derangement," 258, 259).

[51] Davidson appeals to an analogy. A person may break the rules of etiquette at a formal dinner, using the wrong silverware for the wrong course, but he succeeds in eating alright. Hence, failure to meet an expectation is not a failure to say what one means, to *utter* correctly. The only thing making it worse is the use of a word that is not usually used that way. The speaker is likely going to be more confident that he has been understood when he uses words the way most people do than if he uses them in a novel way. But that does not amount to saying that *whenever he uses them in a novel way, he fails to utter what he means*. The risk of failing to communicate gets higher the more he deviates from normal use, but it does not entail that utterances are failures to say what one means (Donald Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," in *The Philosophy of Michael Dummett*, ed. Brian McGuinness and Gianluigi Oliveri [Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994], 9).

understood by what he said? It seems that he can. Many misspeakings are caught. We hear the wrong word but understand what is meant. On some occasions, it is likely that a word-use does not matter for the overall meaning of what is said. Consequently, no one—neither speaker nor hearer—spots the deviation from convention. However, the speaker has the belief that he will be understood by what he has said. The belief condition does not entail that a speaker will have thought through the words and sentences and then considered whether an interpreter would be able to understand them.[52] It only entails that the speaker believe that he will be understood by whatever he ends up saying. Since, in this case, the speaker has such a belief, he can mean broccoli by saying *cauliflower* even if no one notices. The fact that no one notices does not count against intentionalism.[53] Presumably, if someone had noticed, there would be a recognition of the intention to mean broccoli by cauliflower, but the mere fact that no one noticed does not undermine intentionalism.

## Conclusion

I have argued that there are positive reasons to accept the view that the intentions of authors are necessary to fix their works. I have also argued that the Humpty Dumpty objection against authors' intentions being sufficient to fix the meanings of their works fails. Since that objection is the most forceful of the lot, rebutting it goes a long way towards making extreme intentionalism a palatable and defensible view.

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[52] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 337.
[53] Stock, *Only Imagine,* 90.