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Abductive Reasoning, Intentionalism and Meanings in Artwork

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Abductive Reasoning, Intentionalism and Meanings in Artwork

In his paper Noël Carroll says he will offer new arguments for moderate actual intentionalism, drawing on a close reading of Grice's theory of meaning. I am not sure what exactly Carroll meant was new in his proposal. Others have also attempted to build intentionalist accounts of art interpretation based on the Gricean explanation of linguistic communication, for example Robert Stecker in his 2006 article "Moderate Actual Intentionalism Defended." Like Carroll, Stecker also spoke of accounts of meaning as involving a process of hypothesis formation: "We constantly are forming hypotheses about the point or function of this or that bit in the overall economy of the work."¹ One difference could be that Stecker emphasizes parallels between artworks and *utterances*, whereas Carroll instead compares artists' creation of works to meaningful *actions*, suggesting that the Gricean account can naturally be expanded to include communicative actions as well as utterances. Carroll also wants to stretch the relevant notion of intentions to include things that may not be conscious or explicitly formulated by a speaker/artist/agent: hence his preferred label of "mentalism."

One qualification is important to note at the start. I agree with Carroll when he says, "not all artworks involve meaning." His focus is on cases when artworks *do* have meaning. Such meaning can take various forms, including intellectual or cognitive ones which (either themes or theses), as well as emotional ones, exhibited through expressive properties. Carroll distinguishes the "constitutive" problem of what determines artistic meaning from the "epistemological" problem of how we discern that meaning. Presumably his proposal covers both problems. Carroll also says he will discuss the relationship between interpretation of an artwork and its embodiment.

Much of Carroll's paper is devoted to defending actual over hypothetical intentionalism. Actual intentionalism better enables us to fix accounts of meaning in art: a true account is the one that offers the best abductive explanation, in other words, is the hypothesis that best explains the evidence for what the artist intended.

My comments will take up three different points: (1) whether the intellectual method of *abduction* provides a reason to prefer actual vs. hypothetical intentionalism on epistemic grounds, as Carroll claims; (2) questions about the units of meaning in artworks; (3) problems in applying the Gricean model of intentional speech to actions, including artists' actions in creating their works.

¹ R. Stecker, "Moderate Actual Intentionalism Defende," in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (Autumn, 2006): 429-438.

1. Abduction and Truth: is AI preferable to HI?

Carroll favors moderate actual intentionalism (AI).² He argues that both AI and a leading alternative, Hypothetical Intentionalism (HI), “share a roughly Gricean conception of meaning according to which someone means *x* if he intends to induce the belief in *x* in his audience *and* he intends his audience to recognize this intention”.³ The Gricean account of meaning is reflexive, meaning that it involves intentions about intentions.⁴ On both AI and HI, interpretation involves supplying hypotheses about meaning. However, according to Carroll, HI cannot fix any definite notion of truth among competing hypotheses, because “hypotheses about interpretation may be underdetermined by the evidence.” His point here draws upon the Duhem-Quine view that there will be alternative interpretations of (hypotheses about) the available evidence.⁵ Carroll explains,

That is, the evidence allowed by the hypothetical intentionalist will support different hypotheses from different ideal observers, thus providing no way to establish which one constitutes *the* meaning of the poem. One ideal reader, for example, may weigh the strength of her hypothesis in terms of its comprehensiveness, while another prizes specificity to a greater extent.⁶

Carroll considers AI preferable to HI because it affords, at least in principle, correct answers or true explanations of artistic meaning. The Actual Intentionalist can say that a given hypothesis is right, “namely the hypothesis which coincides with the actual intention of the author (where that is consistent with what is available in the text)”.⁷ Carroll seems to me correct if we are alluding to the *constitutive* notion of an artwork’s meaning, but I am not sure there is much difference between the *epistemic* status of hypotheses about meaning on the two key theories under consideration. In the real world, when we hypothesize about the actual intention of an artist we do advance reasons that provide the best evidence for our views, but this “best evidence” can still allow for competing verdicts – just as with the hypothetical intentionalist model. Carroll offers an array of nice examples of this sort of conjecturing for artworks that range from sonnets to ballets, and from opera to film. He says we interpret these using the method of abduction. Abduction is, in brief, selection of a hypothesis that best explains the available evidence. For example, concerning certain aspects of Joe Wright’s 2012 movie version of *Anna Karenina*, Carroll says, “We directly ask what the intention behind Wright’s directorial choices might be because, even though

2 He actually favors modest actual mentalism, a variant of AI, but for simplicity here I will stick to AI. “Modest actual mentalism contends that the meaning of a poem is determined by the actual intentions and underlying, though not necessarily conscious, assumptions of the poet. That is, modest actual mentalism holds that the cognitive or, more broadly, mental stock of the artist fixes the meaning of the work, so long as said intentions, assumptions, etc. are consistent with what is available in the text.” N. Carroll, “Criticism and Interpretation,” in: *Sztuka i Filozofia: Art and Philosophy*, 42 (2013), p. 14.

3 *Ibidem*, pp. 14-15.

4 P. Grice, “Meaning,” in: *Studies in the Way of Words*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1987, p. 219. See also S. Neale, “Paul Grice’s Philosophy of Language,” in: *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 15 (1992), pp. 509-559.

5 See note 11 on whether context alone fixes meaning – it cannot. N. Carroll, “Criticism and Interpretation,” *op. cit.*, p. 14.

6 *Ibidem*.

7 *Ibidem*.

there might be some precedents, there are no conventions we can invoke."⁸ We ascribe a meaning to it "because that is the best explanation of what Wright might mean given Wright's other directorial choices."⁹ Similarly, we interpret the Rose Adagio section of the ballet *Sleeping Beauty* in a certain way "because it is the best hypothesis we can offer of what the actual choreographer intended to communicate about the princess at this point in the narrative."¹⁰

But the method of abduction does not appear epistemically preferable in truth-identification to the hypothesis-formation procedure followed by proponents of HI. In the classical exposition by Peirce, abduction is contrasted with deduction and induction.

[Abduction] starts with consideration of facts, that is, particular observations. These observations then give rise to a hypothesis which relates them to some other fact or rule which will account for them. This involves correlating and integrating the facts into a more general description, that is, relating them to a wider context.¹¹

Just as with the Duhem-Quine view, so too in abduction there can be multiple hypotheses that explain the evidence. In confronting the challenge of which one to select, Peirce directed us as follows:

1. The hypothesis should explain the facts
2. It should be economical
3. It should be capable of being subjected to experimental testing.¹²

Moving beyond Peirce, let me simply note that as a method, abduction is not yet particularly clear or well defined. To quote from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy article on the topic by Ivan Douven,

...it presupposes the notions of candidate explanation and best explanation, neither of which has a straightforward interpretation. While some still hope that the former can be spelled out in purely logical, or at least purely formal, terms, it is often said that the latter must appeal to the so-called theoretical virtues, like simplicity, generality, and coherence with well-established theories; the best explanation would then be the hypothesis which, on balance, does best with respect to these virtues. The problem is that none of the said virtues is presently particularly well understood.¹³

2. Units of Meaning in Art

My next question concerns units of meaning in art. Carroll discusses the relationship between interpretation of an artwork and its embodiment, giving us some

8 *Ibidem*, p. 16.

9 *Ibidem*.

10 *Ibidem*, p. 17.

11 J. Svennevig, "Abduction as a methodological approach to the study of spoken interaction." Trial Lecture, University of Oslo, October 1997. Retrieved from: <http://home.bi.no/a0210593/Abduction%20as%20a%20methodological%20.pdf>.

12 J. Svennevig, citing K. T. Fann, *Peirce's theory of abduction*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1970.

13 And further, Douven writes, "Giere, in Callebaut (ed.) 1993 (232), even makes the radical claim that the theoretical virtues lack real content and play no more than a rhetorical role in science." I. Douven, "Abduction," 2011, in: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/abduction/>; some references omitted here.

examples of what aspects of artwork seem to require or foster interpretation. On the linguistic model of meaning (which he rejects, rightly I think), there are presumably clear units of communication, such as words and sentences. And language involves a compositional notion of meaning: parts go together to make up wholes. But the units of communication in artworks are not generally so delimited, as Carroll shows is even true for literary artworks like poems - there may be more to a poem's expressive potential involving, say, alliteration or rhythm that goes beyond mere linguistic or grammatical meaning construed by the ordinary methods. What are the relevant units of meaning? Carroll interpreted certain staging choices in the *Anna Karenina* movie, a particular dance position in *Sleeping Beauty*, and the prelude of Wagner's *Das Rheingold*. Intentional actions of artists might include overall aims in a given work as well as a myriad of individual choices, say in film, of lens, angles, lighting, sound, music, acting, and so on. Obviously, the problem of defining objects of interpretation is not a unique one for Carroll or any proponent of AI, but it may take on added urgency if we are told that there can be a "true" interpretation in terms of "the artist's intention." I will have more to say on this in my next section below.

In addition to the problem of identifying the proper object of interpretation in a given work, sometimes we may want to say that the meaning of a work is in part comprised by its role in a larger context such as the artist's oeuvre or a part of it. In other words, perhaps an artist works out a communicative intention in a series of works where each one contributes to the overall process. This might be true, for example, of the self-portraiture series done by artists like Cézanne and Rembrandt, the stylistic ventures of various periods by Picasso, or the color field paintings of Rothko. We could compare the articulation of an intention over a series of works to the expression of meaning someone conveys through a certain pattern of actions, for example, to the consistent ways in which a boss treats a subordinate in the work environment through various job assignments, office moves, memos, and so on. I am trying to question how distinct and individualized intentions are.

3. The Gricean Model Applied to Actions

3a. General Issues about Intention and Action

Carroll thinks the Gricean model of meaningful communication can be extended and applied to actions. He says that historians do this all the time in offering explanations for why a certain key figure from the past did something. He remarks,

We do not approach paintings, movies, music, etc. as we read a printed page. We interpret them as we interpret actions. We ask what the artist has done by making these choices which, in turn, must involve questions about what was intended by performing the pertinent communicative action.¹⁴

14 N. Carroll, "Criticism and Interpretation," *op. cit.*, p. 18. Carroll adds: "Rather, it is more appropriate to approach artistic choices across the board as actions where intentions are relevant to the interpretation of what the artist has done. Where interpretation is pertinent, the artist has performed an action – a communicative action – which needs to be comprehended in terms of what the artist intended

A closer look raises some doubts about how well the Gricean model of communicative speech applies to this broader realm. The most basic issue concerns clarifying and identifying the relevant reflexive intentions – i.e., the ones that people intend to communicate by their actions while at the same time intending that they be recognized by others. The Gricean model appears to assume a fairly high level of conscious awareness of one’s intentions, since one not only intends a purpose or meaning in what one says, but intends that others recognize this intention.

But not all actions are done “with intentions” ahead of time as Carroll himself recognizes (this is why he prefers the term “mentalism” to “intentionalism”). For example when driving I intend to stay on the right side of the road, but this is not something I consciously pay attention to; nor is it clear that I intend others to recognize that I have this intention. This doesn’t mean that such actions are meaningless or done without reason. I take the point here from G. E. M. Anscombe’s classic book on the topic, *Intention*.¹⁵ Anscombe says things like “intention is never a performance in the mind” (section 27, p. 49); or “The only description that I clearly know of what I am doing may be of something that is at a distance from me” (section 30, p. 53).¹⁶

Anscombe meant to argue that intentional actions occur even in cases where there is no conscious act of intending. The problem now is that Grice’s account of communicative speech appears to imply the presence of a self-aware intention in the conscious mind of the speaker - in particular since speakers also intend that audiences will actually recognize such an intention. But I wonder whether ordinary people who act or speak (as well as, of course, artists), can be said to have such particular intentions that they could articulate, along with the reflexive aim of getting others to recognize them. Anscombe emphasizes that a wide variety of descriptions are possible for any given action, such as making one’s arm muscles move, raising a pump handle, sending water into a house, poisoning the inhabitants, and/or fomenting a revolution. Presumably along with these alternative descriptions there are alternative aims or intentions. The array of things done by an artist would be similarly complex, and it does not seem obvious what level the proper account of interpretation should focus on. We can’t say that meaning occurs only at the “largest” level (where, say, Duchamp intends to *épater la bourgeoisie* by works like *Fountain*), because sometimes things at the micro-level are also important, such as an artist’s intentionally creating what look like paint dribbles by the use of carefully executed machine-made dots.

A similar issue has been raised by Alex Kiefer, who also cites Anscombe in explaining his doubts about the relevance of artistic intentions. Kiefer writes,

to do. Where the artist employs conventions in pursuit of her ends, this provides us with evidence of what she means. It does not determine what she means. Her intention does”, p. 20.

15 G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2000; (originally published by Basil Blackwell, 1957). References to the text that follow are to the original 1957 edition.

16 For helpful summaries, see J. Speaks, “A guide to Anscombe’s *Intention*, §§1-31,” September 8, 2004. Retrieved from: <http://www3.nd.edu/~jspeaks/courses/mcgill/519-action/anscombe-1-31.pdf>.

Nothing about this property of artworks, however, entails that they must have a meaning or point, in the sense of being about something or having a content, or that they must be intended to have such content. More to the point, even if an artist does have a specific intention in creating an artwork (that is, the intention to create art), there is no reason to suppose that all or even most of the artwork's properties will also be tied to specific authorial intentions. Most actions can take an intentional object, but need not. G. E. M. Anscombe, in her tortuous examination of intentional action, classifies intentional actions as those "to which a certain sense of the question 'why?' is given application." Application is refused, not to those instances in which the agent would reply, "for no particular reason," but to those in which the reply would be "I did not realize I was doing that." Proper responses to the question "What are you doing?" when addressed to a person strolling along a path include "I'm taking a stroll to clear my head" as well as "Just strolling" or even "Nothing in particular." Analogous to this case is "I'm doing a painting that will exhibit the malleability of perception" versus "I'm doing a painting!" or simply "Painting."¹⁷

Some of these Anscombe-style concerns about agents' abilities to express or formulate intentions are echoed in other kinds of discussions about unconscious intentions, where what is meant is nothing like a Freudian model of the unconscious as what is repressed. There are various accounts in the analytic tradition of philosophy of mind as well as in recent scientifically-inspired theories of consciousness, including those by psychologists like Daniel Wegner and Timothy D. Wilson, that allow for the existence of such intentions.¹⁸ Indeed, one current philosophical contender for explaining consciousness, the so-called "HOT" or "higher-order thought" theory, rejects the Gricean model of meaningful speech precisely because of its commitment to intentions as elements of conscious awareness.¹⁹

3b. Implications for Art

In discussing the interpretation of artworks, points like the following are commonly made: We (allegedly) cannot allude to the artist's intentions in assigning meaning because an artist's statements about intentions may be conflicting. Or, the artist may change his or her mind later on concerning the meaning of their work (as sometimes happens, for example, when a critic offers an interpretation the artist had not thought of but later accepts). It is even said that an artist may not know his or her own intention in creating the work, and may say this directly – or may deny having any particular intention in making it.

Obviously, artists or others can say some of these things without that meaning they are correct. But such claims can find support from certain kinds of art theory which maintain that the artist's intention is worked out through the art itself, and does not exist prior to the work. On such a view, when artists make works, they are involved in a process of figuring out what they intend to communicate. They may not know this until the work is executed, perhaps not even until it is viewed and experienced by others. I would compare the process of

¹⁷ A. Kiefer, "The Intentional Model of Interpretation," in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 63 (2005), p. 276 (footnote omitted).

¹⁸ See T. D. Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious*, Harvard, The Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA and London 2002, and D. M. Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will*, MIT, Cambridge, MA 2002; thanks to my colleague Josh Weisberg for these references.

¹⁹ R. Brown, "HOT Theories of Consciousness and Gricean Intentions," May 30, 2008. Retrieved from: <http://onemorebrown.wordpress.com/2008/05/30/hot-theories-of-consciousness-unconscious-gricean-intentions/>.

creating art in these cases to other kinds of communicative contexts in which people have to work toward grasping their own intentions or aims – as when one tries to articulate one’s inner feelings to a therapist, works out plans for an upcoming vacation with one’s partner, or clarifies a philosophical point through a conversation. It sometimes happens that my colleague says, “Now I see what you want to say. You are arguing that P!” where this seems right, although I didn’t previously realize that was my intention. These contexts do seem to involve meaningful actions or dialogue although they don’t seem to meet the Gricean criteria for conveying one’s intentions. Instead one is communicating partly in order to *discover* one’s intentions.

A point like the one I just made has often been made in expressivist theories of art in the vein of Croce, Collingwood, Langer, and Dewey. Even if the point does not work in relation to more cognitive aims of artists, to convey what he labeled themes and theses in their works, it might apply to the artistic communication of expressive properties. Such a view gets a particularly strong statement in Collingwood, who writes,

when a person expresses an emotion, he is conscious of ... a perturbation or excitement which he feels going on within him, but of whose nature he is ignorant. While in this state, all he can say about his emotion is: ‘I feel ... I don’t know what I feel.’ From this helpless and oppressed condition he extricates himself by doing something which we call expressing himself. This is an activity which has something to do with the thing we call language: he expresses himself by speaking. It has also something to do with consciousness: the emotion expressed is an emotion of whose nature the person who feels it is no longer unconscious. It also has something to do with the way in which he feels the emotion. As unexpressed, he feels it in what we called a helpless and oppressed way; as expressed, he feels in a way from which this sense of oppression has vanished. His mind is somehow lightened and eased.

It may be à propos here to remind readers that Collingwood was also a philosopher of history, i.e., was also interested in explanations of the behavior of historical figures.²⁰

Conclusion

Despite the specific reservations I have expressed here about the usefulness of extending the Gricean model of speech to actions including those of artists, I share Carroll’s general intuitions that interpretation should aim at correctness and that capturing artists’ own aims is a key part of this enterprise. It is a difficult challenge to explain how the enterprise of art interpretation can be made rational rather than arbitrary, and we owe thanks to Carroll for tackling such an important issue.

²⁰ Quoted in G. Kemp, “Collingwood’s Aesthetics,” in: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. N. Zalta, Fall 2012 Edition. Retrieved from: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2012/entries/collingwood-aesthetics/>.