

Randall Auxier

Virtual Intentionalism or Actual Intentionalism?

Sztuka i Filozofia 44, 34-36

2014

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Randall Auxier

Virtual Intentionalism or Actual Intentionalism?

Professor Carroll has offered a case for his well-known moderate actual intentionalism in this instance by arguing that various other approaches, including what he calls anti-intentionalism, cannot handle two crucial requirements. The first is a constitutive question: what determines the meaning of a poem (or other work of art)? And second, the epistemological question of how we can or should go about ascertaining that meaning.

I do not myself defend any of the views Carroll is responding to, and so to state my own view of the matter at this point would take attention away from the way Carroll has framed his inquiry. Thus, I want first to ask questions that come from within his designated framework. After that I will briefly indicate my own view and if Professor Carroll wishes to comment beyond the framework for this essay by saying how a defender of moderate actual intentionalism would respond, I would greatly appreciate that as well.

I think my internal questions, as it were, come from the standpoint of anti-intentionalism generally. Umberto Eco's novel *Foucault's Pendulum* has its significant action centered around a cryptic piece of paper left in a publishers office by a mysterious man (who may or may not have been murdered after his one visit to that office). This piece of paper is what Alfred Hitchcock always called the "MacGuffin" in a story – something that everyone wants for some reason that motivates the action. The piece of paper contains what seem to be notations about a location and what was to be found there. The three main characters come to believe that these "instructions" were written long ago by some people who had hidden the esoteric documents of a secret society (which secret society is an open question). At a crucial moment in the story, the girlfriend of the main character snatches the piece of paper (to see what all the fuss is about) and she rather convincingly shows that it is in fact just a grocery list. I had an opportunity to ask Eco about this once. "Was it just a grocery list?" His answer was "I don't know." Of course, it was his own creation, as an author. But on the basis of Eco's own anti-intentionalist theory, I believe he could go further and say "I can't know."¹ Without rehearsing the

¹ Although Eco has a reputation for irony and authorial mischief, I would point out that F. Scott Fitzgerald also said something similar and was not being playful in the least. In a letter to Edmund Wilson in May of 1925, Fitzgerald said: "The worst fault in it [The Great Gatsby] I think is a BIG FAULT: I gave no account (and had no feeling about or knowledge of) the emotional relations between Gatsby and Daisy from the time of their reunion to the catastrophe." (See Selected Letters by F. Scott Fitzgerald, <http://fitzgerald.narod.ru/letters/letters.html>, accessed October 17, 2014.) Fitzgerald is quite serious

details of Eco's theory (which is a little more subtle than the rough outline of anti-intentionalism Carroll offers in his essay, being a combined semiotic/reader response/socio-historical epistemology), the question is this: How can Carroll's theory deal with (1) "I don't know" as a sincere answer to the query about the author's intentions? and (2) "I can't know" as an authorial response to the same? and most importantly, (3) how would a moderate actual intentionalist satisfy the constitutive question (and also, therefore the epistemological question) when the author's answer is either "I don't know" or "I can't know"?

It seems to me that there *is* a fact of the matter, within the story, as to whether the cryptic piece of paper is or isn't a grocery list. To give up on that claim is to abandon the presupposed history (the unity of action, in Aristotle's terms) that governs the narrative. *Foucault's Pendulum* is not science fiction or fantasy or magical realism, or any other genre that tampers with the three unities. The novel studiously observes all three unities. Hence, the piece of paper has a history that either does or does not include having been a grocery list - in fact, one of the main characters loses his life because everyone believes that this piece of paper holds the key to locating the secret documents. Either these characters have a true belief or a false belief.

The fact in the story is that the piece of paper functions entirely as such a valuable document, even if everyone (except the girlfriend) is wrong about it. But it seems very likely also that it started as a grocery list. In this example, authorial intentions neither determine the meaning here, nor *can* they. Can a moderate actual intentionalist handle such a situation?

With that said, for my own part, I defend a theory closer to the views of Susanne Langer and Arthur Danto. I don't think intentions of any kind (creative or otherwise) are necessarily clear prior to the act, especially if the act is creative. Just because an agent may have a plan of action prior to acting does not mean that the act itself can be determined by, reduced to, or explained by the plan. Most people actually use the idea of "intention" to mix the plan with the act in some vague and unanalyzable way. I think the plan is both ontologically and epistemologically independent of the act, but the *interpretation* of the act is joined primarily to the act itself, *not* to the plan. The plan is, at most, suggestive of how to interpret the act.

We can set up analogies between plans of action and acts as starting points for interpretation, but intention, if it is relevant at all, exists in the process of interpretation. No one, including the agent, can determine an act with an intention except *after* the act. That is, of course, a matter of interpretation and the mode of determination is reflective rather than a mechanical subsumption of a particular act under some kind of universal. I do not think that intentions can operate logically as universals do, and that when we use intentions as explanations, we err about the very real difference between plans of action and interpretations.

about this void in his knowledge of his own characters, as he makes clear subsequently in the rest of this letter and another one to H. L. Mencken written at the same time. He clearly implies there was an important emotional relation between the characters at this time (the story requires it), but he simply cannot find a way to learn what it is.

Thus, I would say that what Carroll is calling “actual” intentions are really only *virtual* intentions, projected before the act (creative or otherwise) as plans of action, and yet failing to determine that act in any explanatory way, and in some cases, failing to determine the meaning of the act at all. When the difference between plans of action and interpretations is properly respected, explanations *become* interpretations and intentions are not conflated with plans of action. This does not deny the existence of authorial intentions, nor does it deny to those intentions a role in interpreting the artwork (or other act), but it prevents us from thinking that we have to supply some sort of causal or quasi-causal account of the relation between prior intentions and the embodied meaning that exists in the work. In short, there can be a fact of the matter about the relationship between the parts of the work and the whole that does not depend on authorial intentions, but is still relevant to both the plan of action and to the later interpretation of the act.

Yet, there need not be a plan of action at all. I would give as an example Arthur Danto’s practice, in making wood block prints, of sitting down to draw with no plan (and no intention except the intention to draw), and to enact drawing until (and if) an image emerged. Only after the act of drawing is temporally extended beyond a few seconds and begins to be collected in reflection does something like a meaning emerge. At that point it would make little sense to say that Danto intended just *this* image, unless one wants to plumb the depths of mysticism. I find that most art interpretation takes for granted that intentions are more powerful than they really are. Danto’s practice might be a form of Zen meditation, and the value of seeing it that way is that we become aware that all kinds of acts, like shooting a bow and arrow, bowling, running, playing tennis, and the like, have a non-intentional act at their core.

I think that appealing to intentions to explain an artwork is ontologically backwards (i.e., the artwork itself explains the virtual intentions, but not the actual ones), and that if intentions are to be included at all, these are relations that emerge between the act and its interpretation. Thus, I would suggest that my view is the true actual intentionalism, since my view draws from the actuality of the act and its real consequences for interpretation, while Carroll’s view is virtual intentionalism, since it mingles virtual plans of actions with actions and then struggles to explain their relation. I am confident that Carroll will not accept this characterization of his view, but I would be eager to hear how he responds to it.