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Edited by Fabian Dorsch and Dan-Eugen Ratiu

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# *Is Moderate Intentionalism Necessary?*

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ABSTRACT. The aim of this paper is to show that the project of founding a Moderate Intentionalism on the compatibility between intentionalism and conventionalism, instantiated in Stecker's *Unified View* of meaning, could be unnecessary. To that end, I will appeal to Davidson's non-conventionalist view of communication, and to the concept of 'fulfilled intention' that can be deduced from such a view. Finally, I will defend that by denying the necessity of convention to fulfil a communicative or an artistic intention, we can establish a relationship between intention and creativity, as much in the use as in the interpretation of language, that affects positively on the justification of intentionalism.

## **1. Introduction**

Moderate Intentionalism has its origin in the problems of Absolute Intentionalism, whose thesis was that the meaning of a work of art is determined by its author's intention. Anti-intentionalists objected that, if what a work of art means is what its author intends it to mean, then intentionalism falls into Humpty Dumpty's view of meaning. Such a view involves the speaker's infallibility since Humpty Dumpty thought that when he uses a word it means what he chooses it to mean for the only reason that he is the master. On their behalf, conventionalists considered that the author's infallibility could just be avoided by admitting that conventions determine the meaning of the work, that is, by denying intentionalism. Thereby, the meaning of the work and the artist's intended meaning could be different in those cases of unfulfilled intentions. One of the strategies of intentionalism in order to face this objection has been to recognize the relevance of conventions, and to explain their role in an intentionalist view of meaning. This is what R. Stecker has done by his *Unified View* of work meaning, in

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the framework of his defence of Moderate Intentionalism (Stecker, 2003, p. 42).

## **2. Intention and Convention in Stecker's Unified View of Meaning**

Stecker has explained how intention and convention could coexist in Moderate Intentionalism: “the last account of work meaning attempts to combine two views we considered earlier and found to be inadequate in their own right as accounts of such meaning. These are actual intentionalism and conventionalism, and the present view, call it the unified view, says, roughly, that work meaning is a function of both the actual intentions of artists and the conventions in place when the work is created” (Stecker, 2003, p. 42). The key point to understand the role of intention and convention in the unified view is to clarify what this “function” consists in and an explanation can be rebuilt by paying attention to some Stecker's extracts.

According to Stecker, the meaning of a work of art is analogous to the meaning of a linguistic utterance (Stecker, 1997, p. 116), whose meaning is determined in the following way: “the meaning of an utterance is the meaning successfully intended by the speaker or, if the speaker's intention is not successful, the meaning is determined by convention and context at the time of utterance” (Stecker, 2003, p. 14). The same happens in the case of artworks: “when the artist succeeds in expressing her intention in the work (which, of course, will commonly involve the exploiting of conventions and context), that is what we should identify with the meaning of the work; but when actual intentions fail to be expressed, conventions in place when the work is created determine meaning” (Stecker, 2003, p. 42). So to speak, this means that conventions work when intentions do not work since, intention determines the meaning in those cases of fulfilled intention and conventions determine the meaning in those cases of unfulfilled intention. Thus, the notion of fulfilled intention seems to be in the core of the ‘function’ that regulates the relationship between intention and convention. Then, what does fulfilling an intention consists in?

Following Grice's view of meaning, Stecker considers that fulfilling an intention depends on the agent's – either a speaker or an artist – capacity of

generating the appropriate “uptake conditions” of meaning (Stecker, 1997, p. 175). In Stecker’s model these uptake conditions seem to consist in something very specific: “a speaker, using a language L, means something by uttering x in L, only if she intends to do A by uttering x and intends the audience to recognize this, in part because of conventional meanings of x or contextually supported extensions of those meanings” (Stecker, 2003, p. 13). This indicates that the meaning of a linguistic utterance depends on the speaker’s intentions as long as the interpreter can recognize them resorting to linguistic conventions and taking into account the specific context. As we can see, conventions lay a role in order to fulfil an intention. Therefore, conventions are a part of the uptake conditions of meaning.

Nevertheless, Stecker ties fulfilled intention and convention more clearly at considering that: “an utterance means whatever its utterer successfully intends (i.e., intentionally does) in uttering it, and success will hinge on correctly employing conventions and exploiting the context of utterance” (Stecker, 1997, p. 173). If fulfilling an intention consists, at least in part, in doing a correct use of conventions, then the meaning of an utterance depends on conventions as much in those cases of unfulfilled intentions – where conventions determine the meaning totally – as in those cases of fulfilled intentions – where conventions determine the meaning at least partly.

In addition, Stecker even suggests that a kind of convention is involved the relation between what is said and what it is implied by what it is said in some contexts as being regulated for a sort of convention. Following his own example, Stecker considers that the possibility that I can say “there are ten sheep in the field” with the intention you to realize there are two missing sheep “relies on a shared understanding between you and me about my point in using those words. That may lead to the establishment of a miniconvention to enable me to express a certain intention in a certain contexts” (Stecker, 2003, p. 49).

By thinking that the success of an intention hinges “on correctly employing conventions” and even that a sort of miniconvention regulates some contexts, Stecker bestows a so relevant role on conventions that a conventionalist would hardly reject the unified view. Hence, it could be thought that this approach turns Stecker’s moderate intentionalism into an indistinguishable theory from a moderate conventionalism. Surely, it

would not be a problem for Stecker's theory itself, since his purpose was to combine intentionalism and conventionalism. Nevertheless, Stecker has moderated the relevance of conventions in the unified view recognizing that "context and convention won't do it all in the business of determining meaning at all levels", since "very often there is no even a miniconvention" that regulates the determination of meaning as happens in the case of irony and metaphor (Stecker, 2003, p. 49).

Thus Stecker minimizes the relevance of conventions only in some special usages of language. But, if those cases where there is not even a miniconvention are – as he recognizes – "very often", then why should we recognize a relevance of conventions in our intentionalist view of meaning beyond being just one among the different ways we implement our intentions? In addition, if it could be thought that conventions lack such a relevance, not just in such very especial – though frequent – cases, but also in our more ordinary communicative intentions, we had another reason to doubt whether the unified view and Stecker's moderate intentionalism are necessary.

### **3. Davidson's Non-Conventional View of Language and Fulfilled Intention**

Playing down the relevance of conventions is possible by appealing to Davidson's non-conventionalist view of communication (Davidson, 1984). Defending such a view could be problematic, since the relevance of conventions in our successful communicative relationships seems to be undeniable. But Davidson's view does not contravene our common sense intuitions, since he does not deny the usefulness of conventions, but their necessity in communication. That is, he considers that convention and communication are not intrinsically related, since there can be communication without convention.

According to Davidson "[...] linguistic communication does not require, though it very often makes use of, rule governed repetition; and in that case, convention does not help explain what is basic to linguistic communication, though it may describe a usual, though contingent, feature" (Davidson, 1984, p. 279). By alluding to a "rule governed repetition" Davidson is challenging Lewis's conception of convention, in virtue of which

“(a) regularity *R* in the behaviour of members of a population *P* when they are agents in a recurrent situation *S* is a *convention* if and only if, in any instance of *S* among members of *P*, (1) everyone conforms to *R*; (2) everyone expects everyone else to conform to *R*; (3) everyone prefers to conform to *R* on condition that the others do, since *S* is a coordination problem and uniform conformity to *R* is a proper coordination equilibrium in *S*” (Lewis, 1986, p. 42). The key point of Lewis’s definition of convention for Davidson is that “regularity in this context must mean regularity over time, not mere agreement at a moment. If there is to be a convention in Lewis’s sense (or in any sense, I would say), then something must be seen to repeat or recur over time”.

The idea of repetition is in the core of the idea of regularity, which is, in turn, in the core of the idea of convention, and it has a twofold nature. In order to something is considered as a convention it must fulfil two conditions: it must happen more than once, and it must involve more than one person. Thus, something that happens just once could not be a convention, even if it involves more than one person, and something that involves just one person could not be a convention, even if it happens more than once. Under this definition of convention, the “shared understanding” that Stecker identifies as the cornerstone in virtue of which you understand that there are two missing sheep when I utter “there are ten sheep in the field” cannot be considered as a convention at all, not even a miniconvention. We do not have reasons to think that the next time I utter “there are ten sheep in the field” you can properly interpret it as meaning “there are two missing sheep”, since my intention can be a different one, and we do not consider a convention something that works just once. If a miniconvention refers to something that works just once, then we do not have reasons to consider it as a convention at all.

According to Lewis’s notion, convention involves a shared regularity, in virtue of which two or more people coincide in something. That is, they do the same regarding a certain aspect, and they do it more than once. In the case of linguistic conventions, it could be considered that what speakers and interpreters do equal is bestowing the same meaning on the words of the speaker’s utterance. However, we cannot suppose that this kind of coincidence is necessary in order to be successful in our communicative relationships. For Davidson “different speakers have different

stocks of proper names, different vocabularies, and attach somewhat different meanings to words; in some cases this reduces the level of mutual understanding; but not necessarily, for as interpreters we are very good at arriving at a correct interpretation of words we have not heard before, or of words we have not heard before with meanings a speaker is giving them” (Davidson, 1984, p. 277). For instance, this is what happens in radical interpretation, where one tries to connect the speaker’s sounds to the given evidence in absence of any shared convention. But it also happens when, being the speaker and interpreter perfectly competent in the usage of a language, the speaker produces an innovative usage of conventions, uses a new word, or simply makes a mistake.

This does not necessarily involves the understanding be affected, since we have interpretative sources beyond conventions. In *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), A. Burgess invented *Nadsat* language, the slang used by the protagonist – Alex – and his friends – his *droogs* –. When Alex’s mother asks him to wake up and to go the school, he answers: “Mum, I can’t go to school today, my *gulliver* hurts”. In this case, even if we do not know what ‘gulliver’ means in nadsat, it is not difficult to guess that Alex is saying that he has a headache, since we know that it is very common to say that the head hurts as an excuse in order not to do something. Unless we have already read a dictionary about nadsat, it is not because of the knowledge of a linguistic convention that we tie ‘gulliver’ and ‘head’. Nevertheless, it could certainly be objected that one can guess the meaning of ‘gulliver’ because of a non-linguistic convention, but a convention after all. Saying that ‘my head hurts’ could be considered as a convention because it is a regularity: it is something that more than one person does and it is something that happens more than once, since to say ‘my head hurts’ is what we usually do when we want merely to make an excuse. But imagine that our most common excuse would be a different one – as it could easily be since conventions are arbitrary –, such as ‘my stomach hurts’, and imagine that the author tells us that when Alex says ‘my gulliver hurts’ he is massaging his temples. In this case, we would have a non-conventional evidence to say that ‘gulliver’ means ‘head’, and we do not need to guess the meaning because of a regularity.

The example shows that speaker and interpreter must coincide in the meaning they bestow to the utterance in order to achieve mutual under-

standing; but only in the very communicative act. They do not have to have coincided in the meaning previously and they do not have to maintain the same meaning in the future, that is, the coincidence is valid for understanding even if it happens only once. Therefore, they do not understand to each other in virtue of a regularity. The shared regularity implicit in Lewis's concept of convention is not demanded for successful communication, so that conventions are not necessary to generate proper uptake conditions of meaning; Therefore, they are not necessary to fulfil an intention.

If this is so in communication – and if we endorse, as I am doing, the analogy between artistic and linguistic meaning embedded in intentionalism –, then fulfilling an artistic intention should not require convention either. Needless to say that the artist and the interpreter must coincide in many things if we can say truly that the former has fulfilled his intention and the latter has grasped the meaning of the work. But not everything that we share is conventional, since not everything involves a shared regularity. The understanding of a work of art does not obey to a previous coincidence between the artist and the interpreter regarding a certain aspect. Interpreters cannot resort to a regularity of previous similar cases to grasp the meaning when they find a new usage of conventions, or they face something absolutely new that does not constitute a convention at all. Therefore, fulfilling an artistic intention does not require conventions and conventions are not necessarily a part of the uptake conditions of work meaning.

Thinking that conventions are a very common vehicle through which we can generally fulfil our intentions does not mean that they are the only one, much less in an artistic context. That is why considering that conventions, or a correct employment of them, are necessary to fulfil an intention would involve a too *narrow* view of what fulfilling an intention is. Having said that, if fulfilling an artistic or communicative intention does not consist in “correctly employing conventions”, then what does it consist in?

As Stecker thinks, fulfilling an intention has to do with the speaker's capacity to generate the uptake conditions of her intention. But an agent – either an artist or a speaker – does not have to restrict herself to a shared regularity in order to generate the conditions that allow her to fulfil her intentions. The scope of these uptake conditions goes beyond conven-

tions, since they can be successfully generated, even though the agent violates conventions, and even in absence of them, by appealing to non-conventional shared things. This indicates that it might be endorsed a wider view of fulfilled intention. Nevertheless, making explicit all the conditions in virtue of which an agent makes herself interpretable, and an interpreter makes her interpretable, is not possible since the uptake conditions are different in each case (Davidson, 1984, p. 278). But this does not mean that some considerations about fulfilled intention cannot be pointed out.

From a Davidsonian point of view, the main requirement of fulfilled intention is to have a *reasonable* intention (Puolakka, 2011, p. 47). An agent has a reasonable intention when she has two beliefs embedded in her intention: (i) the belief that the intention is logically and empirically achievable – notice that one does not have actually the intention of doing something when one believes it is impossible to do (Davidson 2005: 180) –, and (ii) the belief that the intention achievable in the way she is trying to achieve. In the case of a communicative intention, condition (ii) would be the belief that one is generating proper uptake conditions of what one means.

For example, suppose that grasping the meaning of the famous portrait of the Pope *Innocent X* by F. Bacon (1653) requires experiencing the work in the light of the portrait of the Pope *Inocencio X* by Velázquez (1650). In this sense, we should establish a range of relationships between such as perceiving the former as a distortion of the latter, or as revealing the Pope's actual self, and so on. Now we can wonder how Bacon generated the uptake conditions of the work meaning and how he provided the necessary elements in order to interpreters are able to link both artworks. By entitling the work as *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of the Pope Innocent X* the author gives us a clue of what we have to do at interpreting. In addition, Bacon also bestowed his picture a degree of resemblance with respect to the picture that it refers to: he drawn the Pope in the same position, from the same perspective, sat in the same chair, and so on. If the author had not given us such clues, we probably would see the portrait as merely portraying *Innocent X*, instead of seeing it as being a portrait referring to another portrait. In this way, Bacon provides the conditions that allow us to make a link between both artworks.

We can also wonder whether Bacon had a reasonable intention. The fact that Bacon keeps these resemblances makes it able to preserve the intention of his work refers to Velazquez's work as a reasonable intention. Besides, he fulfilled conditions (i) and (ii): he had a logical and empirically achievable intention, and it was achievable in the way he tried to achieve it, namely, making the interpreters capable to perceive the relationship and the contrast between both works by his successfully satisfied tension between distortion and fidelity.

As Puolakka has pointed out, in the case of a communicative intention, the intention is reasonable when the speaker has "a reasonable belief that that the hearer is ultimately able to interpret the utterance in the way he intends it to be interpreted" (Puolakka, 2011, p. 47). Then, how can the speaker acquire this 'reasonable' belief? In art and in communication, the main criterion in virtue of which the agent decides which way make her intention achievable is the very interpreter. An agent configures her intention depending on her knowledge about the interpreter's readiness to understand her intention performed in a certain way. In this sense, Davidson says: "the speaker wants to be understood, so he intends to speak in such a way that he will be interpreted in a certain way. In order to judge how he will be interpreted, he forms, or uses, a picture of the interpreter's readiness to interpret along certain lines" (Davidson, 2005a, p. 101). Following the previous example, if we could think that Bacon formed "a picture of the interpreter's readiness" by considering that it was a reasonable belief to think that his interpreters became familiar with Velazquez's work, then we have another reason to say that he had a reasonable intention.

This view of fulfilled intention is related to Davidson's non-conventionalist view of language in the following way: if the agent has reasons to think that her interpreter is able to understand the utterance or the work even though she does not restrict herself to conventions, then the agent can have the reasonable intention of not expressing herself conventionally. So to speak, speakers and artists can do whatever they want – even try to do something without restricting themselves to conventions –, provided their interpreter's readiness to understand allows them to do so. The very interpreter is the main factor that conditions the agent's way of performing her intention, not conventions. Thus, rephrasing Stecker, we can come to an approximate definition of fulfilled intention: the success of the in-

tention hinges on agent's correctly employment of the knowledge about the interpreter's readiness to grasp her intention performed in a certain way (which is not necessarily a conventional one).

#### **4. Intention and Creativity**

Finally, we can wonder how this view of the role of convention and this view of fulfilled intention are more suitable for intentionalism. The counterpoint of minimizing the relevance of conventions is emphasizing the role of intention, and, according to Davidson, "to emphasize the role of intention is to acknowledge the power of innovation and creativity in the use of language" (Davidson, 2005b, p. 143). If an agent can get rid of the conventional narrowness, then she is able to innovate, to be creative. Precisely, this is what makes intention emerge as a legitimate and necessary criterion to determine the meaning, which is, in turn, what ultimately justifies intentionalism. Intentionalism should not hold a naïve view of language, in virtue of which the only speakers' skill is to combine some given elements in accordance to established rules and conventions. Speakers can introduce new elements and new rules for their combination, provided the rest of speakers allow them to do so. Otherwise, we could not be creative as speakers at all. For Davidson "there is no word or construction that cannot be converted to a new use by an ingenious or ignorant speaker", what's more "sheer invention is equally possible" (Davidson, 2005a, p. 100).

We are not confined to conventions, and what we can successfully do with words goes beyond their conventional meaning. But if we do not need conventions to implement our intentions, we do not need conventions to grasp the intentions either. This means that creativity is equally relevant from the agent's point of view as the interpreter's. Davidson takes Joyce as the paradigm of an agent with very adventurous non-conventional but, ultimately, reasonable intentions. For example, Davidson points out that "when he (Joyce) uses the word —if that is what it is— "Dyoublong", there is not much chance of guessing what Joyce means, despite the capitalization of the first letter, unless one has Dublin in mind, something Joyce's readers cannot fail to do" (Davidson, 2005b, p. 152). In order to grasping the pun, one should notice the phonetic similarity among "Dyoublong",

“Do you belong?” and “Dublin”, in such a way that “Dyoublong” contains, somehow, as much a question as its answer.

For Davidson, Joyce, like any writer, “must depend on the knowledge his readers are able to bring to his writings. Much of this knowledge is verbal of course, knowledge of what words ordinarily mean. But in Joyce’s case much of what is required must come from other sources”. Certainly, there is no way of understanding the interpretative play that Joyce offers, unless one knows the relevance of Dublin in Joyce’s literary work. However, in order to this knowledge gives a fruitful interpretative result it is not enough to possess it. The interpreter must exploit another skills, such as originality, inventiveness, etc., in order to put this knowledge into operation, since an interpreter could know perfectly well the relevance of Dublin in Joyce’s work and not be able to grasp the pun. Thus, creativity is as important as knowledge, and creativity is as relevant for the user as for the interpreter. Being creative in the use of language would not have any interest if the interpreters lacked the creativity necessary to grasp innovative usages.

This connection between intention and creativity makes better intentionalism because it provides a view of linguistic interpretation that conforms better to our experience of interpreting art, where we need be creative and use our imagination in order to put our knowledge into operation. The non-conventionalist approach shows that we do the same in our linguistic actions as in their interpretation. Since the project of a kind of moderate intentionalism which maintains the necessity of conventions in an intentionalist view or work meaning would hardly leave a room for creativity, it seems to me not just unnecessary, but also detrimental.

## **5. Conclusion**

The aim of this paper has been to counteract the view of intentionalism that tries to make it compatible with conventionalism. But my purpose of justifying the unviability of this approach of moderate intentionalism does not obey to a desire of recovering a stronger view. Mainly, it has to do with two ideas: firstly, I consider that minimizing the relevance of conventions underpins and widens the explanatory capacity of the linguistic paradigm

intentionalism is generally based on, and secondly, I think that by paying attention to what happens in language and in art, a non-conventionalist model conforms better to reality. Thereby, rather than focusing on how intentionalism could explain the author's fallibility without resorting to conventions, I have intended to show why including conventions is not a good solution for this problem. Certainly, this does not demonstrate that moderate intentionalism is not totally necessary. Saying that convention are not necessary in order to get over problem of author's infallibility says nothing about how intentionalism could face this problem without resorting to a moderate approach. Given this paper is a part of a wider project, I have an idea on how this could possible. According the notion of fulfilled intention that I have defend, an agent provides the uptake conditions of her intention taking into account the interpreter. That is, the agent cannot choose unilaterally the uptake conditions of meaning. This gives us the clue; could we say, in any sense, that an agent be infallible if fulfilling the intention does not depend on herself totally? I do not think so, but this is a matter for another paper.

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