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The Hypothetical Intentionalist’s Dilemma: a Reply to Levinson

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In a recent essay, Jerrold Levinson defends his version of hypothetical intentionalism (HI), which is a theory of literary interpretation, from two “threats.” The first, argued by Stephen Davies, is that it is equivalent to the value-maximizing view. This is at worst a mild threat since it only challenges the distinctness of HI and not its truth. The other threat, argued by Robert Stecker, is that there are straightforward counterexamples to HI, which, if correct, implies the view cannot be true. We will argue that Levinson does not successfully fend off either threat, and further, that in the process of attempting to do so, creates a further dilemma for his view.

In a recent essay, Jerrold Levinson defends his version of hypothetical intentionalism (HI), which is a theory of literary interpretation, from two “threats.”1 The first, argued by Stephen Davies, is that it is equivalent to the value-maximizing view.2 This is at worst a mild threat since it only challenges the distinctness of HI and not its truth. The other threat, argued by Robert Stecker, is that there are

1 Jerrold Levinson, ‘Defending Hypothetical Intentionalism,’ British Journal of Aesthetics 50 (2010), pp. 139–150. Subsequent quotations are from this paper.
straightforward counterexamples to HI, which, if correct, implies the view cannot be true.³

HI is the position that the interpreter hypothesizes an author and reasons to what that author most likely intended his work to mean. Though some defenders of the position allow considerable freedom to the interpreter in how she hypothesizes the author, Levinson does not. The author he considers must correspond to the public persona of the actual author; that is, to what is publicly known of the author and his works, and excluding private sources of information such as personal letters and diaries. Here is how Levinson expresses his view: ‘the core meaning of a literary work is given by the best hypothesis, from the position of an appropriately informed sympathetic, and discriminating reader, of authorial intent to convey such and such to an audience through the text in question’ (p. 139). What makes a hypothesis the best? Levinson has generally argued that epistemic considerations should be primary in arriving at such a hypothesis. Aesthetic considerations are secondary. However, his practice is not always consistent with this stipulation.

The main rivals to be discussed here are the value-maximizing account and moderate actual intentionalism. The former holds that the interpreter should favour the interpretation that makes the work best, provided that interpretation is maximally consistent with the work and respects those contextual and other features that determine the work’s identity. The latter holds that the author’s intentions constrain the meaning that can properly be attributed to the work, on condition that those intentions are manifestly realized in the work, and the moderate actual intentionalist is prepared to consider all possible sources, whether public or private, of those intentions. Whereas Davies prefers value maximising, Stecker favours moderate actual intentionalism.

We will argue that Levinson does not successfully fend off either threat, and further, that in the process of attempting to do so, creates a further dilemma for his view. In general, when distinguishing HI from value maximising (for example, at p.

Levinson stresses that his account seeks to interpret the actual author’s work, but when it comes to comparing HI with moderate actual intentionalism (see p. 150), he stresses instead the search for best readings. Rather than establishing that his brand of HI holds a middle ground, what is revealed is the theory’s ambivalence between claiming the author’s sanction for an interpretation and allowing the interpreter freedom to hypothesize. The more Levinson succeeds in fending off counterexamples to HI, the more his view looks like a value-maximizing one, and the more he distinguishes HI from this latter view, the less he succeeds in replying to counterexamples.

I.

Levinson protests that Davies mischaracterizes his position by describing the author as hypothesized, since his account targets the actual author’s public persona.

We do not think talk of hypothetical authors is out of place in this context given that it is not the full-blooded author (private diaries and all) who is considered. It is appropriate to talk of a hypothesized author who shares with the actual author his public persona. And this is more plausible than insisting that the interpretation considers the actual author, given that HI rejects as irrelevant the actual author’s intentions at the point where they come apart from what his public persona is most likely to have intended.

Davies’ primary objection to HI is that it misrepresents its own nature by attempting to distinguish itself from the value-maximising theory. He argues that consideration of the work’s merits enters foundationally into judgments about what the hypothesized author most likely intended.

Levinson replies: ‘Such a position confounds the idea that it is always eminently plausible to suppose that an author abstractly aimed for the best in what he wrote with the idea that it is always eminently plausible to suppose that an author concretely intended what is in fact the artistically richest interpretation consistent with the text he has produced. ... This is a mistake, for there are surely cases where a given interpretation of a work will be the one we have most reason, all relevant textual and extra-textual evidence taken into account, to attribute to the author as intended, and yet that not be the interpretation that makes the work most
interesting artistically, since although it is a view of the work the author could well have envisaged, it is not the one the author most likely did envisage, so far as we can see, it being plausibly assumed all the while that the author was aiming, in the abstract, at a work and an interpretation of that work that would be artistically optimal’ (p. 142, italics in original).

Suppose we have a work supporting two interpretations, one of which makes the work manifestly superior to the other. When would we think the inferior one is our best attribution to the author of intended meaning? Only when we have very strong evidence that this is so. Then the interpretation that makes the work better is not maximally consistent with the work and those contextual and other features that determine the work’s identity. Otherwise, even if the author is known to muddle through sometimes with confused ideas about what he thinks the best interpretation would be, and allowing that knowledge of this is public, it does not seem reasonable to assume he did so in the given case if he is judged capable of aiming at the meaning that yields the superior interpretation. Moreover, even if the author sometimes is suspected of creating works that are intentionally suboptimal, perhaps because he thinks they will have more popular success, we doubt that can ever provide a reason for favouring the weaker interpretation as the best that it is reasonable to hypothesize as having been intended. In other words, it seems to us that HI has to be committed to some degree of idealization of the author and the task he sets himself.

We can imagine instances where one might conclude that one interpretation is superior to another, but the author, being a good Christian, is unlikely to have had it in mind. But, where the evidence for this is less than determinative and the superior reading is markedly so and is not such that we should abandon it for not respecting the work’s identity, then it as reasonable to doubt the sincerity of the intention or the strength of the faith as to give up the interpretation. Not even moderate actual intentionalists think that we are obliged to accept all statements or evidence for an intention at face value.

If Swift maintained that his Modest Proposal was not intended to be ironic, we probably should prefer to think he was adding to the joke than to revise our view
of the work. Just as moderate actual intentionalists do not have to be committed to taking all authors’ expressions of intentions as gospel, so hypothetical intentionalists do not have to be committed to taking all aspects of an author’s public persona at face value.

II.

We now turn to the proposed counter-example to HI and Levinson’s reply to it. The first thing to note here is that Levinson addresses just one instance of the proposed counterexample rather than the counterexample itself. The counterexample is any case where a work $W$ means $p$, but $p$ is not intended and the audience of $W$ is justified in believing that $p$ is not intended. This is a counterexample to the actual intentionalist view known as the identity thesis, but what is important here is that it also works against HI. If an audience is justified in believing that $p$ is not intended by the author of $W$, then it will not hypothesize that the author had that intention and hence, on HI, $W$ won’t mean $p$. But, ex hypothesi, $W$ does mean $p$. Hence HI gives the wrong result in such cases. The case of the Sherlock Holmes stories that ascribe two different locations to Dr. Watson’s wounds is merely a proposed instance of the counterexample. The text fictionally asserts that the wound has location A and also fictionally asserts that it has location B. This implies it is fictionally true that it has both locations, which is an impossibility. An informed audience would be justified in believing that Conan Doyle did not intend to make this true. So HI implies that the work doesn’t mean what it fictionally asserts.

How does Levinson reply? One thing he says is that, taken as ‘a work of imaginative fiction aimed at providing readers with rewarding aesthetic experience,’ we should take ‘the text as in error’ about the wound’s location. We understand this as saying that, despite the error in the text, the works are free of inconsistency about the wound’s location. But Levinson also says that the text fictionally asserts something other than what it appears to, viz. merely that ‘Watson’s war wound is somewhere on his body.’ (All quotes from p. 144.) Both these explanations cannot be correct, since the text can’t both be in error as the first account explicitly says and not in error as the second account implies. Now it seems just incorrect to say that the text merely asserts that Watson has a wound somewhere on his body (it clearly
says more), so the first account seems the more preferable. But Levinson also says that if we take the text as a factual report, we should regard it as asserting the inconsistency, even though it could have come about by a similar slip of the pen or other carelessness. Given this treatment of factual reports, we find no basis for either solution about what is fictionally asserted based on semantic or epistemic considerations. Only considerations about what would be an aesthetically best reading could possibly justify such a proposal. But this suggests that it is value maximization that is driving the solution. However, it is not clear to us that aesthetic considerations can legitimately determine semantic meaning. So we are unconvinced that the Holmes case is not a counterexample to HI.

But even if it were not a counterexample, there are other cases that plausibly would be. Some of these will also involve inconsistencies. Some will be so woven into the plot that Levinson’s “rectification” procedure would need to be very extensive indeed. Others, especially rife in films, will involve the visual imagination in ways that exclude recitification. From countless examples, we mention just two from the movie Gattaca. In one scene, Jerome rips his jacket while punching a police officer, but soon after it is intact. In another, swimmers are shown to be naked and not naked (wearing boxer shorts). Should we suppose the movie represents a jacket in an indeterminate state of repair and swimmers in an indeterminate state of undress?

However, there are other cases that do not involve inconsistencies. Consider cases of ambiguity. We may have good reason not to attribute, as intended, an ambiguity to an author, but he or she may have nevertheless uttered one. If someone’s utterance is genuinely ambiguous, then it really has more than one meaning even if an informed audience is justified in attributing only one meaning as intended. In this connection, consider Levinson’s example of the film, The Swimming Pool. Suppose that – perhaps due the director’s publicly stated, widely disseminated analysis of the film on a DVD version of it – it’s clear that he intended, and an audience would be justified in attributing to him as intended, that the main sequence of the film is merely imagined by its protagonist. His intention could nevertheless be unsuccessful, and the sequence could actually be ambiguous. This is
precisely what Levinson thinks happened. ‘I think it is ... false that the film means only what it was intended to mean by its maker ...’ (p. 150). We want to make two points about this example. First, that while Levinson intends this point to go against actual intentionalism (though it only really counts against the identity thesis), it could equally count against HI as long as epistemic considerations are in the forefront in determining the best hypothesis about authorial intention. The second point is that Levinson only reaches a different conclusion by appealing to value maximization. We should view the work as ambiguous, he says, because ‘the film is a richer, more satisfying work when so viewed’ (p. 150).

Recall the following remark already quoted earlier where Levinson attempts to distinguish his view from value maximization: ‘There are surely cases where a given interpretation of a work will be the one where we have most reason, all relevant textual and extra-textual evidence taken into account, to attribute to the author as intended, and yet that not be the interpretation that makes the work most interesting artistically...’ The Swimming Pool could easily be just such a case. That Levinson still wants to give it the more artistically interesting interpretation supports the two points made in the previous paragraph, (a) that a work can be ambiguous even though the best hypothesis about the author’s intention is that only one of those meanings is intended (hence the counterexample to HI), and (b) that value-maximizing considerations play a greater role in his practical implementation of HI than he suggests in the quoted passage.

Moderate actual intentionalism or in Stecker’s terminology the unified view – unified because it unifies under one view intentionalist and conventionalist determinates of meaning – can accommodate unintended ambiguities and textual inconsistencies because it recognizes that not all intentions are successful and only successful intentions are meaning-determining. Levinson, however, charges that moderate actual intentionalism cannot offer a non-circular definition of work meaning and for this reason is not a viable alternative to HI. Not so. There are in fact several accounts of work meaning determined by successful intention that are clearly non-circular, whatever other criticisms might be levelled against them. Stecker’s proposal is as follows: An utterance means X if (a) the utterer intends X,
(b) the utterer intends that her audience will grasp this in virtue of the conventional meaning of her words or a contextually supported extensions of this meaning permitted by conventions, and (c) the first intention is graspmable in virtue of those conventions or permitted extensions of them. Notice that although this definition's uptake condition refers to a meaning, it is a different kind of meaning than utterance or work meaning (namely, conventional meaning). Hence there is no circularity. A more Gricean definition could have an uptake condition that refers to an effect in an audience (that the audience believes or imagines something). There are yet other options. So moderate actual intentionalism can easily avoid the incoherence with which Levinson believes it is inevitably saddled.

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5 We thank Paisley Livingston for comments on a draft of this response.