

# ART AND INTENTION

A PHILOSOPHICAL STUDY



PAISLEY LIVINGSTON

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*A philosophical study*

Paisley Livingston

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## Preface

Sextus Empiricus relates a story about Apelles of Kolophon, the legendary fourth century BC artist whose motto is said to have been 'Not a day without a line'. Apelles was at work on a picture of a horse, having set himself the task of producing a vivid depiction of the lather on the animal's mouth. Frustrated by his failure to achieve the desired effect, he angrily cast his paint-soaked sponge at the picture, only to discover that the paint he had splashed onto the surface yielded a fine depiction of the horse's lather.<sup>1</sup> Sextus suggests that the sceptic can enjoy a similar success: when we suspend judgement, tranquillity follows.

I draw a rather different lesson from this legendary episode of artistic creation. In thinking about art, we want to keep in mind the artist's specific intentions, and the actions and events to which they give rise. Apelles, for example, has definite aims in mind when he begins to paint his picture. His efforts are successful until he tries to perfect the representation of the lather, and he finally gives up on realizing that intention. (It is said that in a lost treatise on painting, Apelles argued that knowing when to stop working on a picture is a crucial part of the artist's skill.) The painter's attempt to destroy the fragmentary picture also fails, its unexpected by-product uncannily recalling the abandoned intention to depict the lather. I imagine an Apelles who finds his painterly diligence mocked by the fortuitous appearance of what looks like a successful work of art.

My conjecture is that the artist is quite unlike Sextus' sceptic. Tranquillity does not follow the accidental appearance of a mimetic effect, because Apelles is after a kind of artistic value that depends crucially on the skilful and intentional realization of his intentions. The painter knows he had

<sup>1</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, ed. and trans. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 10–11. For background on Apelles and the allegorical tradition inspired by one of his lost works, see David Cast, *The Calumny of Apelles: A Study in the Humanist Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

taken up the challenge of skilfully painting the lather, and he cannot pride himself on achieving that goal. We can, of course, imagine an Apelles who learns how to splash paint to achieve desired artistic effects, but that is a different story.

Intentions, then, are a crucial part of the story of artistic creation. In aesthetics the topic of intention is broached most often in debates over the relevance of artists' intentions to interpretations of works of art. Assumptions about the nature of intentions usually remain implicit, the prevailing thought seeming to be that there is an underlying consensus concerning what intentions are and do, and that it is consequently unnecessary to go into the matter in any detail.<sup>2</sup> Yet in fact the advocates of rival theses on the interpretation of art rely upon divergent, and at times, rather tendentious premisses. Intentions are taken, for example, to be dark and elusive creatures of the mental night; essentially unknowable and indeterminate, intentions are thought of as ineffectual subjective illusions, such as an artist's private musings and forecasts regarding what he or she might do some day. At the other extreme, intention, or more precisely, the author's 'final intention', is cast as an atomic and decisive movement of the individual subject's sovereign will, and as such is supposed to function as the sole locus of the meaning of a work of art. Alternatively, intentions are conceived of as the *post hoc* constructions of an interpreter. The very determinacy and existence of an artist's intentions are said to depend on another person's acts, and in some accounts, on various interpreters' divergent imaginings.

Such contrasting assumptions about the nature of intentions cannot all be right, and they have significant and divergent implications. If intentions were in fact epiphenomenal, reference to them could have little or no explanatory or descriptive import; if, on the other hand, intentions infallibly determined the work's meaning, knowledge of them would be crucial to our understanding of art; and if the path to intentions were paved by others, the question of how attributions should be made would be decisive. These and other divergent implications of rival assumptions about inten-

<sup>2</sup> There are a few, article-length exceptions, yet the range of views on intention taken into account in them remains quite restricted. See, for example, Colin Lyas, 'Wittgensteinian Intentions', in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 132–51; and Michael Hancher, 'Three Kinds of Intention', *MLN*, 87 (1972), 827–51.

tions indicate the importance of investigating our reasons for preferring any one of them, and especially those reasons that do not amount to the question-begging contention that a given assumption is best because it supports one's favoured view of interpretation or some other topic in aesthetics. Additional, and in my view, sufficient motivation for a more explicit and detailed consideration of intention in aesthetics derives from some striking lacunæ in the critical literature: little or nothing is said, on either side of the question of 'the validity of interpretation', about various sophisticated accounts of intentions, about collective or joint intentions, about the diversity of intentions' functions, or about the complex relations obtaining between intentions and other attitudes.

*Art and Intention* has been designed to offset these tendencies in primarily two ways. First of all, I explore some of the implications that assumptions about intentions have for a number of distinct issues related to the making, reception, and value of works of art, and not only the question of interpretation. Although the latter topic is discussed in two of my chapters, my treatment of it is framed and informed by investigations of a number of issues of independent interest. Second, with regard to the question of which assumptions about intentions are to be preferred, I draw explicitly on the literatures of action theory and philosophical psychology, focusing, more specifically, on rival claims concerning individual and collective or shared intentions. The upshot is not the dubious thesis that we have a definitive, wholly unproblematic account of intentions; I do, however, identify what I take to be insightful proposals regarding the nature and functions of intentions. I also identify some unanswered questions and lines for future enquiry.

Although I am to be classified as a partial intentionalist in a sense to be specified in what follows, I think it important to declare at the outset of this study that I take various anti-intentionalist claims to be quite sound. There are, for example, excellent reasons to reject the sort of old-fashioned biographical criticism and Great Man historiography away from which Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and company swerved in making their notorious, hyperbolic anti-humanistic pronouncements of May 1968 inspiration. An exclusive focus on the artist's self-understanding and psychology can obscure crucial dimensions of the context of creation, and it is not a good idea to try to reduce complex fictions to the status of psychological symptoms—a recurrent foible of biographical criticism. In

their strongest versions, intentionalist principles of interpretation are, I shall contend, misleading: the meanings (and other artistic features) of a work are not all and only those intended by its maker(s). Intentionalist insights can be divorced from at least some of the notions associated with what is called the 'Cartesian Subject'—a construct routinely scourged by theorists of several stripes. More specifically, intentionalists need not work with assumptions involving the agent's infallible self-knowledge and control—such as the thesis that to have a mental state is necessarily to be aware of it, and the idea that one's beliefs about one's mental states are always veridical. Nor are intentions always rational, lucid, or the product of careful deliberation. For example, it is plausible to imagine that when Apelles abandons his intention to paint the lather, the intention to destroy the picture by flinging the sponge at it emerges spontaneously and without due reflection. The impetuous gesture is none the less intentional, and its consequences stand in contrast to the intended results. Indeed, the story loses its very point if that contrast is not drawn.

Chapter I takes up two central issues: the nature of intentions and the overall status of the discourse or psychological framework within which attributions of intention are framed. I begin with reductive accounts of intention and objections raised against them, and then move on to a non-reductive perspective that underscores the various functions intentions play in the lives of temporally situated agents. Following Michael E. Bratman, I reject the methodological priority of so-called 'intention-in-action' and focus on the diverse functions of future-directed intentions to undertake some action.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, intentions are characterized, following Alfred R. Mele, as 'executive attitudes toward plans', the roles of which include initiating, sustaining, and orienting intentional action, prompting, guiding, and terminating deliberation, and contributing to both intrapersonal and interpersonal co-ordination.<sup>4</sup> In the final section of Chapter I, I turn to a discussion of a range of competing positions with regard to the overall status of intentionalist psychology, including 'error

<sup>3</sup> Michael E. Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987); and *Faces of Intention: Selected Essays on Intention and Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Alfred R. Mele, 'Deciding to Act', *Philosophical Studies*, 100 (2000), 81–108, at 100. Additional references to Mele's work on intention and related topics are provided in Chapter 1.

theory', eliminativism, instrumentalism, and versions of realism. With reference to the tension between anti-intentionalist theory and intentionalist practice, I discuss, but do not rely on, a transcendental argument based on the thought that anti-intentionalism is necessarily self-defeating. Similarly, I discuss, but do not embrace, 'double standard', contextualist, and 'Southern Fundamentalist' strategies for dealing with this question. My schematic treatment of these issues is not presented as having unravelled 'the world-knot', but does, I think, provide a reasonable basis for the investigations undertaken in the rest of this work.<sup>5</sup>

Chapter 2 examines some functions of intention in the making of art, a central goal being to explore a *via media* between Romanticist and rationalistic images of artistic creativity. Like Paul Valéry and some of the other authors who have written about the creation of art, I attempt to characterize both the spontaneous and deliberate, unintentional and intentional aspects of the process. A first question concerns the *necessity* of intentions to art-making. I contend that they are indeed necessary, arguing for this view in part by means of an examination of such putative counter-examples as automatic writing. With regard to the subsequent question of intention's roles in the making of art, I discuss ways in which future-directed and proximal intentions initiate and orient artists' intentional undertakings, prompting and framing their deliberations and activities. The question of the distinction between complete and incomplete works receives an action-theoretic analysis that makes possible an elucidation of several different senses of 'fragment' in critical discourse. Some of my key points are illustrated with reference to Virginia Woolf's writerly activities, as exemplified and commented upon in her diaries and novels.

Chapter 3 focuses on conceptions of authorship, individual and collective. Although it is sometimes complained that intentionalism is somehow linked to individualist dogma, I argue that the recognition of intentions is in fact crucial to our understanding of diverse forms of collective authorship and art-making. I discuss and propose an alternative to Foucauldian

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer is often said to have characterized the problem of 'free will' as the 'world-knot', but he may have had a different question in mind in using that expression. For background on free will, see Robert Kane, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), which includes an informative bibliography.



and other approaches to authorship, defending the idea that authorship is a matter of the production of utterances or works with expressive or communicative intent. With reference to contemporary philosophical analyses of joint and collective action, I propose an account of joint authorship broad enough to handle a range of cases, while distinguishing it from both individual authorship and from cases where authorship does not obtain. Although I do not conflate authorship and art-making, I do suggest that an analysis of the latter can be patterned after my account of the former.

It is uncontroversial to observe that people frequently take an interest in relations between different works by a single author or artist. Yet there has been little theorizing about the nature of these relations or the bases of critical interest in them. Chapter 4 is a response to this gap. My point of departure is an innovative and insightful essay by Jerrold Levinson concerning different kinds of relations between works in a single author's corpus. In developing a different approach, I outline an actualist, genetic perspective informed by Bratman's discussions of 'dynamic' intentions and the functions of plans and planning in our lives as temporally situated agents. This position is illustrated with a discussion of various examples, including Karen Blixen's bilingual *œuvre* and aspects of the careers of Ingmar Bergman, Virginia Woolf, and Mishima Yukio.

Chapter 5 deals with some issues in the ontology of art, taking as its point of departure philosophers' extrapolations from the Jorge Luis Borges story, 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*'. I contend that the success of arguments to the effect that a literary work is not reducible to a text requires an independent defence of claims about the identity and individuation of texts, and to that end, I present a new, 'locutionary' account which conjoins syntactical and speech-act theoretical conditions, where the latter include an intentionalist condition. I go on to elucidate some of the several senses of 'version' in artistic contexts, exploring the idea that the individuation of works and versions depends on an intentionalist perspective. The upshot of this chapter is nothing resembling a comprehensive ontology of art, but claims any theory of this sort ought to take into account.

In Chapter 6 I turn to the perennial debate over intention and interpretation, arguing for a form of partial intentionalism with regard to one central kind of interpretative project. I situate my position in relation to

other proposals in the literature, and more specifically, rival, fictionalist approaches and hypothetical intentionalisms. I distinguish between different lines of argumentation that can be given in support of a partial, actualist intentionalism, opting for an axiological approach that refers to the kind of artistic value involved in the skilful realization of intentions. A key issue in this chapter hinges on the nature of the 'success' condition to be weighed on artists' intentions, and the viability of a sharp distinction between categorial and semantic intentions. Rival assumptions about intentions turn out to have a crucial role in our weighing of alternative stances on the interpretation of art.

Problems related to the application of the intentionalist ideas sketched in Chapter 6 (and in particular, the question of success conditions) are further pursued in Chapter 7, which focuses on three main topics: the fiction/non-fiction distinction; the nature of fictional truth, and the determination of fictional truth. I sketch a pragmatic approach to the nature and status of fiction, and with reference to proposals by David K. Lewis, Gregory Currie, and others, I defend a partial intentionalist approach to fictional content. The question of how that approach may be applied is explored with reference to the interpretation of István Svabó's 1991 film, *Meeting Venus*, the story of which depends crucially on the qualities of an embedded performance of Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser*.

In thinking about the issues taken up in this book I have learnt a great deal from the many persons with whom I have discussed these and related matters. Although I cannot mention them all, thanks are due to John Alcorn, David Bordwell, Michael E. Bratman, Michael Bristol, Staffan Carlshamre, Finn Collin, Gregory Currie, David Davies, Dario Del Puppo, Paul Dumouchel, Sue Dwyer, Jan Faye, Berys Gaut, Susan Haack, Robert Howell, Dorte Jelstrup, Ute Klünder, Erik Koed, Petr Kot'átko, Peter Lamarque, Jerrold Levinson, Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, Poul Lübcke, Adam Muller, Robert Nadeau, Stein Haugom Olsen, Anders Petterssen, Bo Petterssen, Torsten Petterssen, Paul Pietroski, Trevor Ponech, Göran Rossholm, Siegfried J. Schmidt, Thomas Schwartz, Tobin Siebers, Robert Stecker, Peter Swirski, Folke Tersman, Kristin Thompson, Ron Toby, Tominaga Shigeki, Willie van Peer, George M. Wilson, and numerous colleagues and students at McGill University, Roskilde University, the University of Aarhus, Siegen University, Lingnan University, and the

University of Copenhagen. Alfred R. Mele deserves special mention, as I have learnt a lot from his work on action theory and intentions, especially in the context of our collaboration on two papers. Robert Howell (who got me started in aesthetics at Stanford three decades ago) offered helpful comments on a draft of Chapter 4. Berys Gaut and Stephen Davies read through the entire manuscript and provided a number of important suggestions for improvement. Gary Iseminger and Neven Sesardic also read and commented on Chapter 5. Jerrold Levinson offered helpful input on an early version of part of Chapter 1 and comments on parts of Chapter 6. Two anonymous readers provided some helpful comments on the manuscript. I also want to thank Mrs Clara Selborn (née Svendsen), Marianne Wirenfeldt-Asmussen, Tore V. Dinesen, and the staff at the Royal Danish Library for facilitating my archival research on Karen Blixen; Mrs Selborn kindly answered a number of questions about her collaboration with Baroness Blixen. None of these intelligent interlocutors should be blamed, of course, for whatever shortcomings this book may have.

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# Chapter 1

## WHAT ARE INTENTIONS?

Few words have caused such barren discussion in aesthetics as the word “intention”, complains Richard Wollheim in *Painting as an Art*, and he adds that one reason for this is that the term has been used either more narrowly or more broadly ‘than seems reasonable elsewhere’.<sup>1</sup> Just what a reasonable usage of ‘intention’ might consist of is the topic of this chapter. I begin by taking a look at some salient theses about the nature and functions of intentions, and then turn to some claims about the status of intentionalist psychology as a whole. The upshot of my relatively cursory survey of these complex topics will be some ideas about intentions to be employed and developed in my subsequent chapters.

### CONCEPTIONS OF INTENTION WITHIN INTENTIONALIST PSYCHOLOGY

The expression ‘intentionalist psychology’ will be used in what follows to refer to any attribution of conscious or unconscious mental states or attitudes, such as belief and desire. Utterances in everyday exchanges about people’s thoughts and actions are included, as are the propositions of psychologists in a wide range of research traditions, including many strains of psychoanalysis, as both conscious and unconscious intentions are attributed to persons under analysis.<sup>2</sup> Intentionalist psychology includes

<sup>1</sup> Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1987), 18.

<sup>2</sup> For example, although Anton Ehrenzweig mobilizes familiar psychodynamic concepts in his discussion of artistic creation, he also complains that ‘modern abstract art has made us too

the innumerable biographies and works of art criticism in which thoughts, motives, wishes, desires, anxieties, and a host of other subjective states are imputed to artists and the people with whom they interact. The term 'intentionalist psychology' can also be understood as covering various non-discursive attributions, such as a person's unspoken thoughts concerning what he, she, or someone else thinks, believes, desires, or intends.

Although there is widespread agreement that there is such a thing as intentionalist psychology—or 'folk psychology' as it is dimly designated by some contemporary philosophers—there is much less agreement as to its specific components, beginning with the question of what sort of item an attitude should be taken to be. There are also fundamental questions concerning the overall status of intentionalist discourse—to which I return in the last part of this chapter.

Intention is a case in point. 'Intention' and relevant terms in other languages (*intenzione*, *Absicht*, *hensigt*, *yitú*, *kokorozashi*, *tsumori*, *layon*, *úmysl*, *zamiar*, etc.) are multifarious as far as ordinary usage is concerned, nor is there any consensus amongst experts as to how a univocal concept might be stipulatively associated with these expressions. Conceptual clarification is needed, then, the goal being to carry forward the most cogent and useful aspects of the relevant thinking and discourse. I turn now to some of the main proposals in the literature, beginning with some of the more 'narrow' or reductionist usages decried by Wollheim.

Some attitude psychologists equate intentions with one of several meaningful cognitive or motivational states, such as forecasts, inklings, urges, wants, hopes, or longings. The social psychologists Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen, for example, define intention as 'a person's subjective probability that he will perform some behavior'.<sup>3</sup> Intention, then, is just a special case of belief, namely, one where the object of the belief is one's own future behaviour. Another proposal in contemporary psychology is that

willing to ignore the artist's conscious intentions', in *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967), 96. A similar point holds with regard to a more recent example, Nancy Mowll Mathews's informative *Paul Gauguin: An Erotic Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen, *Belief, Attitude, Intention, and Behavior* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1975), 12. Thanks to Alfred R. Mele for bringing this and the following source to my attention.



intention is a conscious plan to perform some behaviour.<sup>4</sup> Intention has also been equated with an evaluative attitude, with predominant motivation, and with volition or the will.<sup>5</sup>

Such minimalist views, it has often been rejoined, are too simple to account for the complexity of prevalent intentionalist discourses and attributions. Alfred R. Mele argues for this conclusion by pointing out that not all intentional activities are plausibly held to be motivated or triggered by a single kind of volitional action, the status of which is itself controversial. Volitions are actions, yet intentions are neither actions nor necessarily issue from them. Nor does it seem plausible to expect all intentions to be conscious, or the products of deliberate reflection. As Mele writes, 'Under ordinary circumstances, when I hear a knock at my office door I intend to answer it; but I do not consciously decide to answer it, nor do I consciously perform any other action of intention formation.'<sup>6</sup> (I say a bit more about the contrast between conscious and unconscious psychological states in Chapter 2.) Another of Mele's criticisms of minimalist views is that intending is not a kind of belief because someone can fully believe he or she will end up doing something, such as succumbing to temptation, without having any such intention. Intention is not the same as a plan, as one can think of a plan for doing something without having any intention of acting on that plan. And intending is not reducible to wishing, wanting, or desiring because the latter need not result in any intention to act, if only because the objects of some longings are believed to be out of reach. It seems unlikely, then, that any single notion can suffice to stand in for or elucidate the idea of intending.

These and other criticisms of minimalist proposals need not be taken as entailing that intentions constitute a special, *sui generis* attitude. One may instead hold that if other items, such as belief and desire, are combined in the right sort of way, a successful analysis of intention may be devised. Reductionists about intention deny, then, that the term refers to an independent kind of mental state. They often propose instead that

<sup>4</sup> Paul Warshaw and Fred Davis, 'Disentangling Behavioral Intention and Behavioral Expectation', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 21 (1985), 213–28.

<sup>5</sup> For a sophisticated volitionist approach, see Carl Ginet, *On Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Mele, *Springs of Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 141.