

Comments on Kenneth P. Winkler’s “Signification, Intention, Projection”

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Winkler argues that Locke, Berkeley and Hume are intentionalists: that is, they hold that a main goal of interpreting speech is recovering the speaker’s intended meaning. He also suggests that framing the story of early modern philosophy of language in terms of intentionalism will be helpful. I think the evidence Winkler presents of Locke’s intentionalism is compelling, but I have several questions about what that intentionalism amounts to and how it’s significant.

First, what is the status of Locke’s intentionalism? Is it a philosophical theory he’s adopted, albeit not one he feels the need to articulate precisely? Or is it more like an unexamined assumption? Similarly, what is the relevant contrast class? Locke, Berkeley and Hume are all intentionalists, on Winkler’s view—and so are all the other early modern writers he mentions. Is intentionalism then an unexamined assumption of the early moderns in general? Or is Locke actually disagreeing with some philosopher(s) in virtue of his intentionalism? Finally, what motivates Locke’s intentionalism? Winkler says that it helps answer a question raised by Locke’s linguistic thesis that words signify ideas in the speaker’s mind: which ideas, out of all those present to her mind, are the ones signified? However, he also says he’s not sure that Locke realizes the connection—so presumably he must think that Locke’s intentionalism has some other motivation.

I think we can start getting a handle on that motivation by looking at one passage I found very surprising when first reading Winkler’s paper. I hope that doing so will also help us see how framing early modern philosophy of language in terms of intentionalism is helpful. In the course of discussing Locke’s claim at 4.5.8 that our words are ‘designed by’ our ideas to signify things, Winkler says, “it’s strange to attribute intentionality to ideas” (7). In the next paragraph, he repeats the thought:

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“We might still be troubled by the lingering intentionality that even this reading seems to assign to ideas”. But what’s so strange about attributing intentionality to ideas? Aren’t ideas the most obvious bearers of intentionality?

However, Winkler suggests that we should think of intentionality as fundamentally lodged in speakers rather than their ideas, although they can only exercise their intentionality by using ideas. At first this suggestion struck me as conflating intentionality in the sense of aboutness with intentionality in the sense of having intentions. It doesn’t strike me as odd to think that ideas by themselves are about something—but it *is* strange to think that our ideas have their own intentions or plans.

On further reflection, I started suspecting that part of how framing early modern philosophy of language in terms of intentionalism is supposed to be helpful is, precisely, that it shows that the aboutness of ideas and our plans in using them are more tightly connected than we might have previously thought—and that, *contra* my initial assumption, our plans in using ideas are logically prior to their aboutness. If this is indeed what Winkler has in mind, then perhaps he thinks that one motivation for Locke’s intentionalism is that it is derived from a more fundamental belief that the way words and/or ideas acquire their intentionality is via the speaker’s intentions.

Moreover, if this is what Winkler has in mind then another thing I was initially puzzled by in reading the paper starts to make sense: how Winkler got from the discussion of intentionalism to a taxonomy of sources for the intentionality of ideas that placed an unusual emphasis on projection. Winkler distinguishes the intentionality of ideas as given from the intentionality of ideas as modified by the mind. Now, the intentionality of ideas as given can’t be due to us: for one thing, this would make them into ideas as modified by the mind; for another, it seems that *some* intentionality must be given to us *before* we bring more intentionality into being via our communicative intentions. Winkler thinks that the intentionality of ideas as given must be either inherent or derived from causal relations with things in the world. But ideas as modified by the mind could gain intentionality in other ways as well: by the mind projecting ideas onto things by “an otherwise ungrounded direction of its intention” (12); or by projecting them in a way grounded on some relation to the world we take ideas as given to have.

There must then be some limitations on how Winkler sees the intentionality of ideas as deriving from our communicative intentions: ideas as given must get their intentionality from elsewhere. So is this sort of projective intentionality supposed to be limited to ideas of substances? Winkler notes that on Locke’s view we don’t try to refer words like the word ‘blue’ to an unknown underlying reality in the same way we try *and fail* to refer substance terms to unknown real essences. But he seems to think this is strange: does Locke have any good reason for thinking that we don’t or can’t refer the name ‘blue’ to, say, the aspect of bodily texture that grounds the power rather than the power itself?

I’m not sure why Winkler finds this strange—it seems to me that he’s already told us the reason. We can’t refer names for simple ideas of secondary qualities to textures rather than powers because *we* don’t refer them to powers in the first place. Rather, the ideas must refer to powers on their own, without any help from the mind’s intentions.

Let me try to sum up the source of my puzzlement. I think Winkler holds that the intentionality of words and/or ideas derives from the mind's intentions. But he also suggests that not *all* intentionality can be like that—some ideas must have intentionality in their own right. So is Locke's intentionalism supposed to be limited to substance talk? The texts Winkler quotes as evidence of Locke's intentionalism don't strike me as supporting that limitation. So I'm still not entirely sure what the connection between intentionalism and intentionality is supposed to be.