Philosophia (2009) 37:507–509
DOI 10.1007/s11406-008-9149-1

Early Modern Intentionalism: Replies to LoLordo's Comments

Kenneth P. Winkler

Received: 19 June 2008 / Accepted: 8 July 2008 /
Published online: 12 August 2008
© Springer Science + Business Media B.V. 2008

Abstract I clarify Locke's intentionalism and explain what we might gain by paying more attention to the role of linguistic intentions in the work of the British empiricists.

Keywords Locke · Berkeley · Hume · Signification · Intention · Intentionalism · Notions · Power · Causation

Antonia LoLordo is right to press me to say more about the relationship between the intentionality of speakers and the intentionality of ideas. I did not intend to conflate them, and I did not mean to assign priority to one of them over the other. But then what did I think might be gained by talking about them both?

Let me begin with an easier question. LoLordo asks about the status of Locke's intentionalism: is it a philosophical theory or an unexamined assumption? I am inclined to think it was an assumption, largely unexamined, made by Locke and nearly everyone around him.[1] As I say in the paper, I do think there is a good

[1]Note that my statement of intentionalism is very undemanding: it stipulates only that one of our main aims as interpreters, and perhaps our primary aim, is to recover what the speaker intended to communicate. I have not undertaken the kind of investigation required to support my suspicion that early modern intentionalism was widespread, but see, in addition to the texts quoted or cited in my paper, Samuel Clarke's *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*, ed. Ezio Vailati (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Section 3, p. 21, where an author's "true meaning" is equated with his "true intention," and the "Apology" in *A Tale of a Tub*, sixth edition (London: S. Tooke and B. Motte, 1724), pp. iii-xxi, where Jonathan Swift defends himself against interpreters who have "*overlooked the author's intention*" (p. viii). (The "Tale" itself, for example in section 2 (pp. 22–44), is in part a parody of anti-intentionalist modes of interpretation.) Swift's intentionalism resembles mine in allowing for unintended meanings. As an excuse for offensive unintended meanings in his own text, Swift pleads "*youth, and frankness of speech, and his papers being out of his power at the time they were published*" (p. xii). His final point raises an issue for intentionalism—the social or collaborative character of modern textual production—that is pursued by Jerome J. McGann in *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), an expanded edition of a book first published by the University of Chicago Press in 1983.

K. P. Winkler (✉)
Department of Philosophy, Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA
e-mail: kenneth.winkler@yale.edu

philosophical reason for framing Locke's linguistic thesis intentionalistically, so that instead of making the broad and implausible claim that words immediately signify whatever ideas we have in mind when we speak, it makes the narrower and more compelling claim that they immediately signify the ideas we intend to communicate. At least once in the *Essay*, Locke frames his thesis in the narrower and more compelling way, but I do not know whether he does so for the reason I supply.

Because intentionalism was, I suspect, ubiquitous (or very nearly so) in the early modern period, I cannot easily point, as LoLordo hopes, to a contemporary contrast class. But I do have some observations to offer. The first is that early modern intentionalism may be closely linked to the assumption that words are arbitrary human inventions. If they had taken words to be God-given, early modern thinkers could not easily suppose that words owe their significance to our intentions, but in the freer atmosphere of what might be called "linguistic humanism," intentionalism could flourish. Intentionalism may have helped, in turn, to sustain linguistic humanism, by suggesting how words came to be invented. The making of words could be seen as a simple matter of appointing sounds or marks to serve as vehicles of our intentions.[2]

The significance of whole statements or propositions can, of course, be determined by our intentions even if words are God-given, and this brings me to a second observation: it is easier to see intentionalism as an account of the significance of whole statements or propositions than it is to see it as an account of the significance of isolated words or terms. Hannah Dawson writes, in a passage quoted in my paper, that "early modern philosophy of language is fundamentally a philosophy of *words*."[3] I think any reader of Locke will see her point, but if reading Locke as an intentionalist takes us in a different direction—if it enables us to see that words, for Locke, signify things as well as ideas, and alerts us to the potential importance of his views on signifying that—it may provide us with some of the contrast LoLordo is hoping for. Third and finally, I can point to texts, such as the Star Chamber's condemnation of William Prynne and Mandeville's dialogue between Horatio and Cleomenes, in which unintended meanings or "constructions" are acknowledged. These passages do not take us beyond intentionalism as I have defined it, because it requires only that the recovery of intended meanings be *one* of our main aims as interpreters. The presence of unintended meanings may be compatible with even stricter versions of intentionalism, if intended meanings can be understood as meanings that could have been intended, or as meanings that conscientious listeners could reasonably judge to have been intended. If such accounts of unintended meanings do not strike us as obviously correct, we may again be getting glimmers of the deeper sort of contrast that I believe LoLordo is seeking.

Back now to the point with which I began: what do I think might be gained by bringing one kind of intentionality, the intentionality of speakers, together with another, the intentionality or "aboutness" of ideas? I think something might be gained because it seems to me that although they differ, they interact. I am especially

[2] That appointment (whether by evolving practice or by explicit decree) is itself an act of intention ties everything together into a very neat package.

[3] Locke, Language, and Early-Modern Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 7.

intrigued by the possibility that our intentions as speakers and thinkers might outrun our ideas. In my paper, I portray Locke, Berkeley, and Hume as generally hostile to this. But this is a very partial view. Does Locke think that we cannot speak of the real essences of substances, or merely that we shouldn't? If we can, and if we do so by forming a "relative idea" of those real essences, do our intentions manage something for which our ideas themselves cannot account? When we think abstractly we are, according to Berkeley, Hume, and perhaps even Locke, contemplating ideas that are perfectly determinate. These ideas do not seem to fix the content of our thought. Berkeley, at least, views abstraction as selective attention. But is it, more fundamentally, a feat of redirected intention? Berkeley's appeal to notions has puzzled and frustrated many of his readers. Can notions, or thoughts involving notions, be regarded as intentions that do not require ideas? When, in Hume's view, I wrongly apply my ideas by placing them where they do not belong, do my ideas resist me? And is their resistance something that my intentions enable me to overcome?

I realize that these questions and suggestions are not completely clear; my thinking about early modern intentionalism is at a very early stage. All I can do now is commend it to your attention, and look forward to seeing what others, and perhaps myself, might make of the questions I've raised.