

ACTUAL INTENTIONALISM, INTERPRETATION, AND ETHICAL CRITICISM

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I want to advance a version of the doctrine of actual intentionalism (AI). Rather than follow the trend and develop yet another response that tries to neutralize the criticisms thrown at AI from anti-intentionalist and hypothetical intentionalist corners, I will set these aside and try to make a positive case. There are many forms of actual intentionalism, but the particular one I want to advance contends that an author's actual intentions are relevant in some cases to the correct interpretation of his or her work.

When I say that an author's actual intentions are *relevant* to the interpretation of his work, I do not mean the same thing that Noel Carroll does when he argues for "modest actual intentionalism." When Carroll argues that an author's actual intentions are relevant to the interpretation of his text he means that, in *genuinely* ambiguous cases where multiple interpretations are equally well-grounded in a text's linguistic and literary properties, "the correct interpretation of a text is the meaning of the text that is compatible with the author's actual intention."¹ That is, when the text equally supports multiple interpretations, then the author's actual intentions become relevant in that the author's intended meaning constitutes the correct interpretation. In contrast, I will argue that an author's actual intentions are relevant to the interpretation of his work in the sense that, in *prima facie* ambiguous cases where multiple interpretations *seem to be* equally well-grounded in a text's linguistic and literary properties, an awareness of those intentions puts us hermeneuts in a better interpretive position to detect whether or not one of those interpretations is better grounded in the text's properties than the other(s). I do not want to argue, as Carroll does, that an author's intentions constitute the meaning of a text in genuine cases of ambiguity. Rather, I want to argue that an author's

¹ Carroll, 'Interpretation and Intention', 76.

intentions are helpful in discovering what the meaning of a text is in *prima facie* cases of ambiguity; it is in this sense that the intentions are *relevant* to interpretation. Since by itself, this thesis seems abstract, I want to put some meat on it by focusing on a particular author and his work.

And to further motivate this position, I will show how its acceptance can enhance our capacity to engage in the practice of ethical criticism. That is, I will argue that if we think ethical criticism is a proper aim of interpretation and if we want to enhance our capacity to engage in the practice of it, we have a good reason to be actual intentionalists and accept that an author's actual intentions are relevant (in the above sense) to the interpretation of her work. My thought is that if I can show that an author's actual intentions are relevant to some interpretative questions that have ethical implications, then I can show that an awareness of those intentions would allow us to morally evaluate her work more properly. Proper moral evaluation depends on proper interpretation, and by helping us to discover the proper interpretation, a consideration of the author's intentions can help us properly morally evaluate her work.

My particular case for this paper will be Thomas Hardy and his "prescribed responses" toward Christianity in two of his novels: *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*. Within the scholarly world, literary critics have generally approached Thomas Hardy's relationship with Christianity through both biography and literary analysis. Though their methods are practically the same, they have often come to very different conclusions. There is one camp of scholars that argues that Hardy had a hostile attitude toward Christianity and another camp of scholars that argues that Hardy was sympathetic or, at the very least, neutral with regard to it.² Those who see Hardy as anti-Christian interpret his novels in a markedly different way than those who see Hardy as neutral, and they both appeal to biographical evidence about Hardy to make their respective cases. If we step back and look broadly at the debate, we may ask: is the recovery of Hardy's intentions with regard to his portrayal of Christianity relevant to the correct interpretation of his novels? It seems that to the scholars it is. I think this is so because when we look at his novels, we find that his treatment of Christianity is *prima facie* ambiguous. It is not explicitly hostile and yet apparently not completely innocent either. His "prescribed responses" to Christianity—the responses he invites us to have toward it—are apparently ambiguous enough to engender two competing interpretations of his intended

² See Jedrzejewski's *Thomas Hardy and the Church* for an introduction to the debate.

treatment of the religion. Faced with the *prima facie* ambiguity of the text itself, Hardy scholars seem to be quick to appeal to his biography in order to assemble materials for a case concerning his actual attitude toward Christianity. Presumably then, Hardy scholars are functioning as actual intentionalists of some sort; that is, they are operating on the view that Hardy's actual intentions are relevant in some way to the interpretation of his work.³

Then the question would be, *when* are the author's actual intentions relevant to the interpretation of his work? I submit that they are relevant to interpretation when the object of interpretation (e.g. a passage or a prescribed response) is *ambiguous*. When a passage is not ambiguous, then it should be interpreted by consulting its linguistic and literary properties.⁴ But when a passage is ambiguous and multiple interpretations of it are *prima facie* equally well grounded in its linguistic and literary properties, then we should consider the actual intentions of the author to be relevant. The next question would be, *how* are the author's intentions relevant to the interpretation of these ambiguous cases? I will address this question later.

For now, let me ask: what motivates Hardy scholars to search Hardy's biography and attempt to resolve the nature of his apparently ambiguous prescriptions concerning Christianity? Why do they not simply assert that Hardy's prescriptions are ambiguous and remain content with that? Apparently they think there is some connection between an author's actual intentions and the proper interpretation of his work, but an additional motivation for their attempts to discover his actual intentions may be that a lot *rides* on the correct interpretation of those prescriptions. In particular, our *moral evaluation* of Hardy and his work seems to depend on what he intended by his treatment of Christianity. If we discovered that Hardy intended to unfairly caricature Christians, such a finding would have important implications for the ethical criticism of Hardy and his novels. Some have contended that he had such intentions and have deemed his novels anti-Christian propaganda. Others have decried such an interpretation and argued that Hardy had no such intentions. It can easily be seen that such results could have implications for Hardy's readership. Would we want our children reading propaganda? Hardy's novels remain standard

³ This review of the literary scholarship on Hardy may provide further support—in the debate between actual intentionalists and hypothetical intentionalists—for the thesis that actual intentionalism of some sort reflects the actual practice of literary critics. See Carroll, 'Interpretation and Intention', 85-88.

⁴ By this move, we can ground interpretation firmly in the text, allow for the possibility of an author's failure to realize his or her intention (the denial of which is counterintuitive), and avoid the problem of Humpty-Dumpty-ism—the absurd idea that a text can mean something simply by the author willing it so. Proponents of Carroll's modest actual intentionalism, anti-intentionalists, and my brand of intentionalism seem to substantially agree on how we are to interpret unambiguous passages.

texts on university reading-lists and syllabi, but that might change if Hardy's work turned out to prescribe anti-Christian attitudes. In a word, a lot is at stake in the recovery of Hardy's intentions.

At this point it would be appropriate to spell out what the practice of ethical criticism is about. There seem to me to be three targets of ethical criticism: we can morally evaluate (1) the author's action, (2) the author himself (his character), or (3) the author's work. An awareness of Hardy's intentions could surely allow us to morally evaluate his actions and his character. But such a result would seem rather insignificant. Would it really matter to us whether or not Hardy himself was an immoral person? Rather, it seems the question we really would want to answer is: is the *work itself* immoral? That is, does it encourage immoral responses in the reader? The answer to this kind of question seems to have more important implications. Would we want to read and promote a book that was written to encourage us to participate in immoral dispositions and affections? Would we want it to be taught in our schools? The answer to these questions seems to be a more worthy task for ethical criticism.⁵ If it turns out that an author prescribes immoral responses, then his work can be properly criticized as immoral.

To consider a relatively uncontroversial instance of proper ethical criticism, consider the case of Marquis de Sade's *Juliette*. It should be criticized as prescribing immoral responses—and thus as an immoral work—since it “invites the reader to find sexual torture erotically attractive, to be aroused by it, to be amused by the contortions described, to admire the intricacy of their implementation, and so forth.”⁶ Sade's *Juliette* seems relatively easy to criticize for its prescribed immoral responses, because the content and details of the novel make it clear that Sade is urging his readers to take pleasure in what is morally reprehensible.

But the situation seems to be different with Hardy's *Tess* and *Jude*. For even if we discovered that Hardy intended to caricature Christians in these novels, if his prescribed responses are apparently ambiguous—if it is not clear whether they should be taken either as intentionally unfair characterizations of Christians or as characterizations that are merely part of his story—is his work really immoral? Does it, *in fact*, prescribe immoral responses? It seems we would have little to no basis for criticizing the work itself if it did not explicitly prescribe an immoral

⁵ Rather than looking at the putative behavioral consequences of certain works of art (the consequentialist approach), I insist along with Carroll that “ethical criticism, properly so-called, takes the experience the work is designed to engage as its object of scrutiny” (Carroll ‘Art and Ethical Criticism’, 370). A work that invites us to participate in immoral responses is properly criticized for its moral flaws.

⁶ Gaut, 192.

response. But I would submit that an ambiguous prescribed response can be just as sinister and immoral as an explicitly prescribed immoral response, if not more so. And this is where an appeal to actual intentions would come into play. This is where I think the author's actual intentions would become relevant to the interpretation process.

If we figured out that Hardy intended to prescribe immoral responses to Christianity, then we could look at the *prima facie* ambiguous prescriptions and suppose that Hardy may have been subtly prescribing immoral responses through them; that what seem *prima facie* to be ambiguous prescriptions may really be subtle immoral prescriptions. That is, we would be properly attentive to these "ambiguous prescriptions" and wonder if Hardy is trying to be subtle. For subtlety can be an effective tool. If the prescription were an *explicit* prescription for an immoral response, we would be less likely to participate in that response, since we would have an apparent reason to withhold our participation—namely, because we would recognize it as obviously immoral. When this happens, the author often fails to secure the audience's uptake of his prescriptions. But if the work subtly and implicitly prescribes an immoral response, we would be less disposed to recognize it as immoral and would probably be more inclined to be carried along by the text and respond as the author wanted us to. The author would apparently be better able to accomplish his intended aim—getting us to participate in the immoral response—if he used sufficient ambiguity and subtlety. So an implicitly prescribed immoral response may be more pernicious than an explicitly prescribed one.

But there is also the prospect that the ambiguity may be so thorough that we fail to respond as the author wanted us to. So it seems that a sufficient *degree* of ambiguity is needed so as to not make the immoral prescription explicit (which would detract from its effectiveness) and yet not so ambiguous that the reader has no inclination at all toward the prescribed response. The difficult question would then be, how do we distinguish an implicit immoral prescription from a thoroughly ambiguous prescription?

I think the actual intentionalist is in a better interpretive position to make such a distinction—to detect the implicit immoral prescriptions. To see why, consider the interpretive position of the anti-intentionalist. Presumably, she would try to look at the text as a whole and consider relevant background assumptions in trying to detect any implicit immoral prescriptions. But if, as in the case of Hardy's *Tess* and *Jude*, it is not really clear from the text itself how Hardy wanted us to respond (hence the debate between the two competing interpretative camps), then it seems that

the anti-intentionalist would be hard-pressed to resolve the ambiguity and may have to remain content with it. In such a situation, her refusal to consider Hardy's actual intentions would undermine her capacity to properly interpret and morally evaluate these two novels. Whereas the actual intentionalist, cognizant of Hardy's actual intentions and holding them to be relevant to the interpretive process, would be in a better position to detect subtle immoral prescriptions. This is so because, on the plausible assumption that Hardy's intention to caricature Christians would inform his works to some extent, the actual intentionalist would be acutely sensitive to any feature of these two novels that, for instance, reflects (or ambiguously reflects) negatively upon Christians. It may not be that every ambiguous prescription is directed at getting readers to react negatively to Christians, but if she knows that Hardy wanted his readers to read his novels and respond in that way, then she knows it is more likely that these ambiguous prescriptions have subtle features that are intended to move readers to do so. She would, as it were, be on the lookout for these subtleties and be in a better interpretive position to find them than the anti-intentionalist whose limited vision may only allow him or her to see ambiguity. That is how an awareness of an author's intentions would be relevant to the interpretation and evaluation of his work.

One could object that a *perceptive* anti-intentionalist could detect those subtle features that incline the reader to the immoral response—and could thereby detect the implicit immoral prescriptions. And I concede the point. But practically speaking, I do not think the anti-intentionalist has much reason to “be on the lookout” for such immoral prescriptions if she thinks the author's actual intentions are irrelevant to the interpretation of his work. It is likely that in some cases the anti-intentionalist would not even detect there are *prima facie* ambiguous prescriptions when there actually are. The negative portrayal of Christian characters in Hardy's novels may just be part of his stories—and she may not give it a second thought to consider whether Hardy is inviting his reader to actually react negatively to Christianity itself. But the intentionalist—who has discovered that Hardy intended to caricature Christians—will better detect and pay close attention to the ambiguous prescriptions, note their subtle features, and properly interpret them (or some of them) as implicit immoral prescriptions. It is the actual intentionalist who would thereby be better able to provide the grounds necessary for a proper moral evaluation of Hardy's work, for it is she who will be in a better interpretive position to detect the immoral nature of Hardy's *prima facie* ambiguous prescriptions.

But in some cases, it seems that the actual intentionalist will not be in a better interpretive position. For instance, if Hardy's prescriptions were *genuinely* ambiguous, then an awareness of his intentions would not be of help in interpreting them—because there would be no subtle features of *prima facie* ambiguous prescriptions to detect.⁷ Further, in cases where we cannot discover the author's intentions with regard to a particular passage or work, the actual intentionalist obviously will have no interpretive advantage over the intention-disregarding anti-intentionalist. Paul Celan's poetry often exemplifies both kinds of cases. Consider Celan's 1957 poem "Tenebrae".⁸ Some interpreters (e.g. Hans-Georg Gadamer) see Celan as putting forward a kind of interfaith, pro-Christian existentialism. Others (e.g. Stanford professor John Felstiner), however, see the poem as bitter towards God and anti-Christian. And both views seem to have some textual support.⁹ But overall, the poem is genuinely ambiguous, and an examination of Celan's biography has not helped me (or anybody else that I am aware of) explicate it because it is not at all clear what Celan's intentions were in writing it. With such cases—where the content is genuinely ambiguous or where we do not have access to the author's intentions—it seems that the actual intentionalist and anti-intentionalist are on equal footing in their interpretive endeavors.

But what I have demonstrated is that in other cases, the awareness of an author's intentions is relevant to the interpretation of his work in the sense that, in ambiguous cases where multiple interpretations *seem to be* equally well-grounded in a text's linguistic and literary properties, an awareness of an author's actual intentions puts us hermeneuts in a better interpretive position to detect whether or not one of those interpretations is *better grounded* in the text's properties than the other(s). If we discovered that Hardy intended to unfairly caricature Christians in his works and thereby intended to urge us to react negatively to Christians, then that awareness would put us in a better interpretive position to resolve the nature of the apparently ambiguous prescriptions

⁷ This is *contra* Carroll. Carroll would say that the author's intentions, in these genuinely ambiguous cases, would determine or constitute the meaning of the prescriptions—but, as Daniel Nathan has pointed out, this move presents a problem that is of the same logical structure as the problem of Humpty-Dumpty-ism. A genuinely ambiguous prescription cannot simply come to mean something just because the author wills it so. An adequate brand of intentionalism must allow for the possibility that an object of interpretation (e.g. a passage, a prescription) can be genuinely ambiguous; Carroll's modest actual intentionalism does not allow for that possibility. So it seems that, at least in cases of genuine ambiguity, an author's intentions are not relevant to the proper interpretation of his work. See Nathan, 'Art, Meaning, and Artist's Meaning', 290.

⁸ Celan, *Selected Poems*, 103

⁹ For a brief introduction to the debate, see Felstiner's *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, 101-105. Also see Felstiner's "'Clawed into Each Other.'"

that we come across in *Jude* and *Tess*. With this awareness, we would be better able to detect subtle, implicit immoral prescriptions (when they are, in fact, there) in Hardy's works and thereby be better able to morally evaluate his work. I have not argued whether Hardy intended to caricature Christians in these two novels, but that is beside the point. The point is that *if* we knew he did so, then surely a consideration of these intentions would allow us to properly interpret (some of) the ambiguous prescriptions as immoral prescriptions and thereby allow us to properly morally evaluate the work—whereas a refusal to consider his intentions would undermine our capacity to provide a proper interpretation of his ambiguous prescriptions and thereby undermine our capacity to properly morally evaluate his work. If we think ethical criticism is a legitimate aim and we want to be in a better position to properly morally evaluate a work containing ambiguous prescriptions, then we should let an author's actual intentions bear on the interpretation of those prescriptions.

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