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What Is a Text? A Pragmatic Theory

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Abstract: The paper begins by defending a principle of procedural individualism according to which meanings are always subjective or inter-subjective. Texts do not have meanings in themselves, but rather are objects to which individuals attach various meanings. Then the paper deploys this analysis of meaning to address debates about textuality. It considers the stability of the text: although texts are indeterminate in that future individuals might attach unforeseen meanings to them, they have determinate content at any given time in that the meanings people have then attached to them are fixed. And it considers the relationship of textual meaning to authorial meaning: authors and readers alike attach meanings to texts, with confusions arising when philosophers assume that one or other must constitute the meaning of the text itself.

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary tells us that a text is "the wording of anything written or printed." Recently, however, the notion of a text has been extended to cover not only written documents but also paintings, actions, items of clothing, and landscapes, anything in fact to which we ascribe meaning. So, while we might generally use as examples objects that are texts in the narrow sense of written records with a physical existence, nothing significant should depend on our so doing. What matters about texts is that they possess meaning. In asking what a text is, we are asking "how do objects –whether real or postulated– come to bear meanings?" and "what is the nature of the meanings they come to bear?".

Perhaps there was a time when it seemed obvious how we should conceive of textual meanings. A text was a written document with an author whose intention in writing it fixed its single correct meaning[1]. Even if there once was such a time, post-structuralism, deconstruction, and reception theory have undermined any such obvious resolution of our questions. Roland Barthes dramatically broke the link between authorial intention and the meaning of the text, saying, "the very being of writing (the meaning of the labor that constitutes it) is to keep the question 'who is speaking?' from being answered"[2]. Michel Foucault dismissed the author as "a function" that emerged among literary critics following the Renaissance[3]. Jacques Derrida argued that once we thus sever the link between text and author, "the text is cut off from all absolute responsibility": it becomes a site of multiple, ambiguous meanings, able "to communicate only its own inability to communicate"[4]. Today, one might say, the text appears in the guise of a fluid, boundless entity that lacks both an author and a stable meaning.

In stark contrast to the post-structuralists, positivists and presentists might suggest that how we conceive of a text and its meaning is irrelevant

1 Such a view has been defended, though with a degree of textual indeterminacy, by Eric D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967; and, more recently, by William Irwin, *Intentionalist Interpretation: A Philosophical Explanation and Defense*, Westport: Greenwood, 1999.

2 Barthes, Roland, *S/Z*, trans. R. Miller, London: Cape, 1975, p. 140.

3 Foucault, Michel, "What is an Author?", in: *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. D. Bouchard and S. Simon, Oxford: Blackwell, 1977, p. 121; and for discussion see Nehamas, Alexander, "What an Author Is", in: *Journal of Philosophy*, 83 (1986), pp. 685-691.

4 Derrida, Jacques, "Signature Event Context", in: *Glyph*, 1 (1977), p. 181.

philosophical chit-chat of little, or no, practical import. A belief in either brute facts or the immanence of meaning within texts might encourage them to argue that texts present the past to us irrespective of any abstract philosophical analysis of textuality. Surely though we can not doubt that different concepts of the text often inspire different types of historical, legal, and literary practice? Surely positivism and presentation should themselves be seen not as neutral meta-theories but as particular analyses of textuality that characteristically promote certain types of historical, legal, and literary practice? As an example of the importance of analyses of textuality for practice we might point to theoretically-inspired readings of John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* as diverse as Leo Strauss's emphasis on Locke's place in the canon, C. B. Macpherson's deployment of economic determinism, and John Dunn's rigorous contextualism[5]. Historians, lawyers, and critics necessarily idealise texts and textual meanings in that they in part construct them through their explicit or implicit theories of textuality. It is important, therefore, that the relevant theories be adequate ones.

The questions of what a text is and how a text possesses meaning are worth asking both for their intrinsic philosophical interest and for their practical import. To answer them, we will distinguish between an object, a meaningful object, a work, and a text. We will find that all meanings are meanings for specific people or abstractions based on such meanings. This analysis of meaning implies that we should renounce the concept of the text as an object that possesses an innate meaning or meanings. Objects become meaningful only because specific individuals intend or understand them to possess meaning. The only viable analysis of a text, therefore, will be that of an object which acts as the site of various works: the text is an object to which various individuals have attached, probably different, meanings. This analysis of the text will enable us to resolve various difficulties about the stability of texts and about the relation between authorial intention and textual meaning.

On Meaning

Think of a text; think, for example, of Locke's *Two Treatises*; more specifically, think of the 1978 paperback Everyman's Library edition of the *Two Treatises* with an introduction by W.S. Carpenter. This text is a physi-

5 *Cf*. Strauss, Leo, *Natural Right and History*, Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 1953; Macpherson, Crawford B., *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962; and Dunn, John, *The Political Thought of John Locke*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969.

cal object: it has a yellow dust jacket with a picture of Locke on it; it has 258 pages; and it is covered with black printed marks. Sometimes we cannot provide such clear accounts of the physical nature of a text because it is one we postulate. We do not have, for example, a single manuscript or book that we would describe without equivocation as Locke's own text of the *Two Treatises*. Instead we postulate Locke's own version of the text, and, through bibliographic and textual scholarship, we try to improve our knowledge of this postulated object[6].

Think now of a physical object that most of us would regard as devoid of meaning at least in itself; think, for example, of a cloud. Straightaway we will realise that texts are never just physical objects; they are always meaningful ones. Indeed, as we suggested earlier, we might define the concept of a text broadly to cover all objects that bear meaning, including, paintings, actions, and even oral stories. Whether we accept this broad definition or restrict the concept of a text to those physical objects that include words will make little difference to what follows. For the moment, then, let us just say that a text is an object that possesses meaning. What though is a meaning?

We will find that meanings exist only for individuals. To accept this principle of procedural individualism need not be to tie the meaning of a text irrevocably to the intention of its author; after all, the meaning a text has for a reader is still a meaning for that reader as an individual even if it differs from that intended by the author[7]. The challenge to procedural individualism does not come from the diverse ways in which a text might be read. It comes, rather, from the existence of social meanings. Principal among such social meanings are semantic meanings, defined in terms of the truth-conditions of an abstract proposition, and linguistic meanings, defined in terms of the conventions governing usage in a community. A

6 A noteworthy example of such scholarship is the critical edition *John Locke's Two Treatises of Government*, ed. P. Laslett, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1960.

7 Recent defences of intentionalism characteristically unpack "intention" as "intention-in-doing" or "intended communication" as opposed to "intention-to-do" or "prior purpose". See Irwin, William, *o.c.*, pp. 39-65; and Skinner, Quentin, "Motives, Intentions, and the Interpretation of Texts", in: Tully, James (ed.), *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, Cambridge: Polity, 1988, pp. 68-78. In doing so, they appear to take intentional to mean "of or pertaining to mind", and they thereby might seem to suggest meanings only exist for individuals. Procedural individualism makes explicit this implication. It also departs form the views of Irwin and Skinner by denying that the relevant individuals must be authors: whereas Irwin and Skinner suggest the intentions of the author fix the meaning of a text, procedural individualism suggests a text is an empty site at which author and readers alike situate various meanings.

defence of procedural individualism should perhaps begin by reducing these forms of meaning to meanings for specific individuals.

The semantic meaning of an utterance comes from what would have to be the case for it to be true. Assuming there are no pure perceptions, what would have to be the case for an utterance to be true must be relative to a conceptual framework[8]. Thus, because individuals alone hold conceptual frameworks, semantic meanings cannot exist apart from for individuals. Because utterances can acquire a semantic meaning only within a set of concepts held by one or more individual, semantic meanings must be abstractions based on meanings for individuals. When we say that a proposition has a semantic meaning P, we imply that a group of individuals, usually including ourselves, share a conceptual framework within which they would accept the proposition as true if P is the case.

The linguistic meaning of a word comes from the concept to which it conventionally refers –the linguistic meaning of "bachelor" is an unmarried man. The bond between a word and the concept that constitutes its linguistic meaning is, moreover, a purely conventional one without any natural foundation –social convention could decree that the word "bac" rather than "bachelor" refer to an unmarried man[9]. Although some words seem to be a peculiarly apt expression for a given concept, as in cases of onomatopoeia, even here there could be a convention that bound a different word to the relevant concept. Because linguistic meanings are thus purely conventional, they are given simply by what individuals do and do not accept as a convention. They exist because a number of individuals take certain words to refer to certain concepts[10]. Linguistic meanings are abstractions based on meanings for individuals. When we say that a proposition has a linguistic meaning P, we imply that a group of individuals accept certain conventions under which they understand it to refer to P.

Although we can reduce semantic and linguistic meanings to meanings for individuals, critics might suggest that there is another form of meaning we cannot so reduce. In considering this possibility, we can con-

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8 Compare the classic argument of Willard V.O. Quine ("Two Dogmas of Empiricism", in: *From a Logical Point of View*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1961, pp. 20-46).

9 The classic exposition of this point is Ferdinand de Saussure (*Course in General Linguistics*, ed. C. Bally and A. Sechehaye, trans. W. Baskin, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966).

10 That linguistic conventions are the products of individuals adopting them has been emphasised by, among others, John Searle (*Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969, pp. 16-24).

trast an intentional meaning, defined as the meaning an utterance has for a particular individual, with any structural or innate meaning that a text might possess and that we could not reduce to intentional ones. Here we might approach utterances in one of two ways depending on which sort of meaning interests us, or rather depending on whether or not we believe in structural or innate meanings[11]. If we want to know about intentional meanings or abstractions based on intentional meanings, we will consider utterances as historical works, that is, as sets of words written, or spoken, or understood in particular ways on particular occasions. In contrast, if we continue to believe in structural or innate meanings, we might consider utterances as reified texts, that is, as sets of words with meanings that are given independently of all people. A defence of procedural individualism might continue now, therefore, to show that structural and innate meanings, and so reified texts, are atemporal, otherworldly objects of which we in this world cannot have knowledge. In effect, there are no structural or innate meanings: we should not reify texts[12].

Imagine that someone in the eighteenth century wrote an essay containing a section entitled "hallelujah lass". If we try to study the essay as a reified text, we will abstract the words and phrases in it from the occasion of its appearance. When we do so, moreover, we presumably will allow for the fact that the phrase "hallelujah lass" can refer to a female member of the Salvation Army. If we believe in a structural or innate meaning to the reified text, it will refer to a female member of the Salvation Army. If we try to ascribe a temporal existence to this reified text, we will be in the ridicu-

11 Several philosophers distinguish between works and texts in various ways. For a very different use of these two terms -one which ascribes an undue agency to texts and identifies works solely with authorial meanings- see Barthes, Roland, "From Work to Text", in: *Image, Music, Text*, trans. S. Heath, London: Fontana, 1977, pp. 155-64. For a use of the terms closer to that proposed here, with, a work being the meaning of a text, see Gracia, Jorge, *A Theory of Textuality: The Logic and Epistemology*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1995, pp. 59-69; and also Gracia, Jorge, *Texts: Ontological Status, Identity, Author, Audience*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1996. However, Gracia does not defend intentionalism, leaving it to a community of interpreters to decide what role intentions play in relation to the meaning of works and texts; and, moreover, he ascribes meanings to texts in themselves rather than leaving them as empty sites on which intentional works are located. He does so because he believes in the existence of logical relations between concepts as such, and so in semantic meanings inherent in concepts. For a lengthier debate on these matters see Gracia, Jorge, "The Logic of the History of Ideas or the Sociology of the History of Beliefs", in: *Philosophical Books*, 42 (2001), 177-186; and Bevir, Mark, "Taking Holism Seriously: A Reply to Critics", in: *Philosophical Books*, 42 (2001), 187-195.

12 Linguistic contextualists rightly complain of the dangers of assuming otherwise. See, most famously, Skinner, Quentin, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas", in: Tully, James (ed.), *o.c.*, pp. 29-67.

lous position of saying an essay written in the eighteenth century referred to an organisation that was not established until the late nineteenth century. Clearly, then, this reified text cannot exist in time - it must be outside of our world.

In order to locate a reified text in time, we would have to appeal to something outside of it, but as soon as we do this, we inevitably switch our attention from the alleged reified text and its structural or innate meaning to a work and its intentional meaning. Imagine we have two essays, one written in the eighteenth century and one written in the twentieth century, that contain exactly the same words and punctuation in exactly the same order. Any fact enabling us to distinguish between the meanings of the two essays would have to refer to the particular occasion of the appearance of one or other of them. It would have to be a fact about the essays as works, not as reified texts. Because the two essays are identical, moreover, they must share any structural or innate meaning they possess. Thus, if the twentieth century essay contains a section headed "hallelujah lass" so that "a female member of the Salvation Army" is part of its alleged structural or innate meaning, the reified text of the eighteenth century essay also must include mention of the Salvation Army. Once again, therefore, we cannot ascribe a temporal existence to reified texts without falling into anachronism. We cannot do so because reified texts do not have a temporal existence. As soon as we consider an utterance as a historical object, we necessarily focus our attention on its intentional meaning as a work. The obvious way to fix an utterance in time is to consider the meaning it had for certain people. We might say, for example, that our two identical essays have different meanings because the words within them meant different things to people in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. To ask about the meaning an utterance had for a particular group of people is, however, to ask about the meaning of various works. To ask what the essay meant to people in the eighteenth century is to ask how they understood the essay. It is to concern oneself with intentional meanings.

Meanings only exist for individuals[13]. There is only one way to avoid procedural individualism without postulating an atemporal, divine or supernatural realm of which we allegedly can acquire knowledge; one must identify a language-x with a meaning-x that exists in history, as do inten-

13 To recognise this is to extend to all meanings Nehamas's argument that a work is the interpretation of an interpreter (*cf*. Nehamas, Alexander, "Writer, Text, Work, Author", in: Cascardi, Anthony J. (ed.), *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1987).

tional meanings, but that exists independently of particular individuals, as would structural or innate meanings. Although some philosophers have tried to defend something akin to language-x, their endeavours seem doomed to fail[14]. Consider what is involved in abandoning the idea that meanings exist only for individuals. When we talk of a social language, we typically have in mind a set of inter-subjective meanings shared by various people. For example, when two people talk of a female friend who is a member of the Salvation Army by saying "Jane is a Hallelujah Lass," they share a set of meanings that constitute the language they use to communicate. Although we might describe their shared language as a social structure, we would not thereby commit ourselves to the claim that it exists independently of particular individuals. On the contrary, it exists only because they, as individuals, share certain meanings. Because language-x does not embody this sort of inter-subjectivity, its ontological status remains extremely vague. It cannot be a concrete entity; nor can it be an emergent entity, since if it were it would have to emerge from facts about individuals. Language-x must exist independently of human thought, since our thoughts are facts about us as individuals.

Surely, then, all meanings are either meanings for individuals or abstractions derived from such meanings? A principle of procedural individualism provides us with the beginnings of an analysis of meaning. It implies that individuals associate meanings with statements, books, films, events, and the like: statements, books, films, and events do not of themselves embody meanings. Objects come to mean something only because someone understands them so to do. Perhaps this idea that meanings are purely human constructs will seem uncontroversial, but even if it does, it still has very controversial corollaries. It implies that we cannot reify any text. We cannot ascribe a meaning –or meanings– to a text in itself.

The Stability of the Text

Earlier we found that a text is an object that possesses meaning. Now we have found that meanings only exist for specific individuals so texts do not possess meanings in themselves. How are we to bring these two insights together? Crucially because meanings only exist for individuals, we cannot identify a single, definitive meaning, or even a set of meanings, that is immanent within, or intrinsic to, a text. Texts are meaningful objects solely

14 For something very like a language-x, see Foucault's account of epistemes as "historical aprioris" that exist in time in a world free of subjectivity (*cf.* Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things*, London: Routledge, 1989, pp. xx-xxii).

because particular individuals attach meanings to them. We can define a text, therefore, as an object –whether real or postulated– that acts as a site on to which individuals project various works. To define the text as a site for meanings is to accept, in the words of J. Hillis Miller, that "a text never has a single meaning, but is the crossroads of multiple ambiguous meanings"[15]. Recently several scholars, including Miller, have tied the ambiguity of texts to the instability of meaning. They argue, usually influenced by deconstruction, that texts are unstable because there are no fixed meanings. However, we have no reason as yet to accept this argument. We have found only that texts are ambiguous because they are the sites of various works, not that works too are ambiguous because meanings are unstable.

Derrida argues that texts are unstable because signification presupposes that "each so-called 'present' element… is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element"[16]. However, the rhetoric of post-structuralism and deconstruction slides unnoticed here between a weak claim that is true and a strong claim that is false. The weak claim is that texts are ambiguous: they do not have innate meanings, so we can understand them in different ways. Few people would disagree. We are at liberty to understand a text as we wish rather than as the author intended or an earlier reader understood it. Obviously, however, we will not be recovering a meaning unless we identify the way we understand a text with the view a past figure took of it. The weak claim of the post-modernists establishes only that we can locate new meanings on the site of a text. It does not establish that we cannot attempt to recover the meanings that others have located at this same site. Thus, because few philosophers want to insist that to read a text can never be to seek to create a new meaning, few philosophers need feel threatened by this weak claim. Nonetheless, the drama of the post-structuralist view of the text often arises from an equivocation whereby a strong position is asserted but only this weak position is defended. The strong claim is that texts are unknowable because we cannot hope to identify works understood as intentional meanings. Clearly this strong claim does not follow from the fact that texts do not have fixed meanings. There is no clear reason why we should not be able to

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15 Miller, J. Hillis, "Tradition and Difference", in: *Diacritics*, 2 (1972), p. 12.

16 Derrida, Jacques, "Différance", in: *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. A. Bass, Brighton: Harvester, 1982, p. 13. Examples of reception theory inspired in part by post-structuralism, include: Fish, Stanley, *Is There a Text in this Class?*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980; and LaCapra, Dominick, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language*, Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983.

understand how a particular individual understood a text just because other people have understood it differently. In order to sustain their strong claim, post-structuralists must show that we cannot recover meanings from the past. Generally they try to do this by defending at least one of the following three positions: meanings or intentions are not stable entities, we cannot climb out of language, and we cannot have knowledge of other minds.

Post-structuralists sometimes argue that we cannot have knowledge of texts because intentional meanings are unstable. "Suppose," they say, "I ask what an author's intention means, and then what the meaning of the author's intention means, and so on"[17]. They argue that all meanings are unstable because any attempt to fix them runs into an infinite regress. We can undermine this argument by asking what exactly the post-structuralists refer to when they talk about the meaning of an intention. Intentions are behavioural or mental states that do not have meanings in the sense utterances have meanings. Thus, although we can ask what a particular description of an intention means, we cannot ask what an intention itself means. If we adopt the behaviourist view of psychological states, to ask about the meaning of an agent's intention is to ask about the meaning of an agent's action; but behaviourists deny we can ask about the meaning of an action as though there were something behind it when there is not[18]. Thus, behaviourism implies that meanings are fixed by intentions that do not themselves have meanings. If we adopt the mentalist view of psychological states, then when people describe a mental state they make an utterance and we can ask what they mean by this utterance, but asking about the meaning of an utterance describing a mental state is not the same thing as asking about the meaning of the mental state itself. Imagine that passers-by overhear Peter saying "hallelujah lass" to Jane and ask him what he means at which point Peter explains that he intended to praise her suggestion. Although the passers-by can ask Peter what he means by this latter statement about his intention, they cannot ask him what he means by his intention. Thus, mentalism too implies that meanings are fixed by intentions that do not themselves have meanings. Intentions seem to be unstable only because we must use language to describe them, and we always can ask about the meaning of the words we so use. Although we can

17 Eagleton, Terry, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1983, p. 69. On the instability of intentions also see Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context".

18 Compare Quine, Willard V.O., *Word and Object*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960, pp. 26-79.

use various combinations of words to describe an intention, however, it remains the same whichever words we use to describe it.

Post-structuralists sometimes argue that we cannot have knowledge of intentions precisely because they exist outside of language whereas we always remain within language. As Derrida puts it, there is only writing, "there is no 'outside' to the text"[19]. Here too, however, the rhetoric of post-structuralism has an unfortunate tendency to slide from arguments for a weak claim that is true to a defence of a strong claim that is false. Few people would deny the weak claim that we must use language, conceived as a set of signs, if we are to refer to anything at all. But this weak claim does not establish the strong claim that we cannot penetrate the linguistic fog to acquire knowledge of the things to which our signs refer. On the contrary, if our signs can refer to reality, presumably we can have knowledge of reality. The real issue, therefore, is whether or not our signs can refer to reality. The post-structuralists who argue that we cannot have knowledge of anything outside of language must do so on the grounds that our language does not refer to reality. But this seems highly implausible. After all, even if we accept that our concepts do not have a one to one correspondence with reality, we still could argue that they can refer to reality within a theoretical context[20].

As a last resort, post-structuralists sometimes accept that we can penetrate the linguistic fog engulfing reality only to deny that we thereby can acquire knowledge of intentional meanings. Derrida, for example, occasionally suggests that intentions are "in principle inaccessible" because we cannot know anything about other people's minds[21]. Behaviourists can rebut this argument easily. If we define psychological concepts by reference to actual or possible behaviour, we can have knowledge of intentions simply because we can observe behaviour. The fact that we cannot know other minds is irrelevant because intentions are not mental states. Mentalists too can rebut this argument provided only that they reject logical empiricism. The post-structuralists' position derives from the twin assertions that we can know things only if we perceive them directly and that we cannot perceive other minds directly. Yet the logical empiricism contained in these assertions does scant justice to our everyday notion of experience. When we

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19 Derrida, Jacques, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. Spivak, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976, p. 158.

20 Compare Quine, Willard V.O., "Two Dogmas of Empiricism".

21 See, for example, Derrida, Jacques, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. B. Harlow, Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 1979, p. 125.

say that we have experienced something, we imply that it exists and that we have had sensations we could not have had if it did not exist, but we do not necessarily imply that we have perceived it in itself. For instance, if we say that we have experienced radio waves, we imply that they exist and that we have listened to the radio, but we do not imply that we have perceived radio waves directly. We imply that we have heard the sounds the radio waves produce in our ear, not that we have heard the radio waves themselves. Thus, provided mentalists accept our everyday, realist understanding of experience, they too can argue that we can have knowledge of other people's minds. They can say that we have knowledge of other people's minds because we encounter their minds indirectly in their behaviour.

So, we can accept that a text is ambiguous, being the site of various works, without thereby concluding that it is unknowable. Reception theorists, however, suggest that the ambiguous nature of texts renders them unstable in the sense of being indeterminate rather than unknowable. As yet, however, we have no reason to accept this argument. We have found only that texts are ambiguous because they are the sites of various works, not that they are indeterminate because we cannot identify the works of which they are composed. Reception theorists argue that we cannot determine the content of a text because the historicity of our being precludes our escaping from our particular historical horizon. Many reception theorists refer us here to Hans-Georg Gadamer's analysis of historical knowledge as dependent on "the inner historicity that belongs to experience itself," an analysis that itself points back to Wilhelm Dilthey's belief that a historical event "gains meaning from its relationship with the whole, from the connection between past and future"[22]. However, whereas Gadamer's followers often take him to have proven the irrelevance and futility of any attempt to fix a text, he himself focused on the implications of human ontology for understanding as such. His concern lay less with the specific methodological problems we face in acquiring knowledge of texts than in general issues about the nature of all our understanding[23]. Anyway, reception theorists

22 Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method*, trans. W. Glen-Doepel, London: Sheed and Ward, 1979, p. 195; Dilthey, William, *Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. H. Rickman, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976, pp. 235-36. Examples of reception theory inspired in part by phenomenological scepticism include Gunnell, John, *Political Theory: Tradition and Interpretation*, Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop, 1979, pp. 110-26; and Ricoeur, Paul, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, Fort Worth: Texas Christian Univ. Press, 1976, pp. 89-95.

23 *Cf.* Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *o.c.*, pp. 267-68. A similar distinction to that being made here is suggested by Palmer, Richard, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*, Evanston: Northwestern Univ.

argue that later historical events or works alter the context of earlier events or texts so we always understand history from a wider perspective than our ancestors but a narrower one than our heirs. When Locke wrote the *Two Treatises*, for example, he and his contemporaries did not have our modern concept of liberalism in terms of which to understand his ideas, but today we recognise his text as one that helped to found such liberalism. Reception theorists argue that the current meaning of a historical event or text depends on a grasp of history as a unity culminating in the present. Thus, because the nature of the present constantly changes, to determine the content of a text, we would have to see history as a whole, which we cannot do.

Reception theory confuses two aspects of indeterminacy. On the one hand, reception theorists correctly recognise that the future fate of a text remains unknown and open-ended: we cannot say what works individuals will attach to that site in the future. On the other hand, reception theorists wrongly imply that the open-ended nature of a text's fate means we cannot determine its current historical content. The current historical content of a text consists of all those works that individuals have attached to it as a site, where because the meaning of a work does not depend on its later significance, we can determine the content of these works and thus the text[24]. We can fix the current content of texts because the meanings they had for specific individuals in the past will not alter with later events. So, for example, we can determine what the *Two Treatises* meant to Locke, and what it has meant to other people in the past, without knowing anything about its future fate, let alone its final significance. We cannot predict the future, so we cannot know how our heirs will react to texts. But we can discover what an author meant by a text, what another person has taken a text to mean, and what particular consequences a reading of a text has had.

The open-ended nature of a text's future in no way makes it a peculiarly indeterminate object. We do not know who will form future governments of the US, but we can write histories of previous governments. We

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Press, 1969, p. 46. Moreover, Gadamer himself explicitly drew on Heidegger to shift the hermeneutic tradition from an epistemological orientation to an ontological one (*cf.* Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *o.c.*, pp. 214-234).

[24] Irwin similarly argues that historical interpretation concerns meaning not significance. However, he then contrasts historical interpretation with criticism conceived as a practice concerned with the significance of a text (*cf.* Irwin, William, *o.c.*, pp. 112-123). Whereas procedural individualism reduces the significance of a text to the way it is read by particular individuals, Irwin's concept of significance appears to locate an aspect of the text apart from such individuals. Perhaps he does not reduce significance to readings by individuals in part because he does not expand the notion of intention to encompass readers as well as authors.

might not know when a volcano will erupt in the future, but we can write a natural history dating its previous eruptions. Our inability to predict the future does not prevent our knowing the past or the present. Once we distinguish the future significance of a text from its current content, we no longer have any reason to deny that texts are determinate objects. There is a fixed reality: an author did mean such and such by a text and others have understood it in this and that ways. Of course, future events might lead us to revise our view of this fixed reality: new evidence or a new climate of opinion might prompt us to adopt a new understanding of a work. But then in all areas of knowledge, the future might cast new light on objects, encouraging further reflection, and leading us to revise our beliefs. In no area of human knowledge does the likelihood of our thus revising our beliefs imply that the objects we currently postulate are unstable.

Texts and Authors

A text is an object that acts as a site at which one or more individual locates a work. So defined, a text is an ambiguous but stable entity with, at any given moment, a determinate content available for study. This definition of a text also enables us to resolve difficulties in both the concept of an author and the relationship of authorial intention to textual meaning[25]. Alongside post-structuralism, deconstruction, and reception theory, there has arisen an increasing awareness of the difficulties of postulating, let alone identifying, authors for texts such as the *Iliad* or a "keep off the grass" sign. In our view, a text is an object that people transform into a meaningful one by attaching works to it. This analysis of the text points to a distinction between the creator of the text as an object –that which causes it to come into being– and the author of the text as an utterance –the person who first ascribes meaning to the relevant physical object. Once we grasp this distinction, we will quickly recognise that although any text will have a creator and an author, the two need not be the same.

Our definition of the text, with its implicit distinction between creator and author, enables us to postulate authors for problematic texts such as the *Iliad* or a "keep off the grass" sign. Consider texts with a composite author or multiple authors. In these cases, we can distinguish the creators of the individual bits of the text from the author who first collected these bits

25 Here we might see procedural individualism as providing a theoretical basis for an insistence on always postulating historical authors as constructs if not persons. *Cf.* Irwin, William, *o.c.*, pp. 28-33; and Nehamas, Alexander, "The Postulated Author and Critical Monism as a Regulative Ideal", in: *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (1981), 133-149.

together in a single text. We can distinguish the numerous people we suppose played an active role in the oral tradition out of which the *Iliad* emerged from the author or authors who first wrote down and attached a meaning to the particular version of it that is of concerns to us. Of course, if we are interested in a component part of a text, we might turn our attention to an author other than the author of the whole. No doubt, for example, the author of St John's Gospel was not also the author of the *Bible*. Similarly, although we standardly ascribe the meaning of a co-authored text to all the authors, we might focus on a component part that we ascribe to just one of them.

Consider next simple texts that recur as, for instance, with common public notices. Some scholars have argued that signs such as "keep off the grass" do not have authors[26]. We might allow that public notices often are created by machines: after all, there is something odd about the idea that they could be created by someone who never sees them nor touches them, such as the person who first put up a sign saying "keep off the grass" or the person who programmes a machine to produce a hundred such signs. Because printing machines cannot ascribe meanings to objects, moreover, we might allow also that the creators of public notices often are not their authors. Nonetheless, we still need not conclude that such notices do not have authors. We can say instead that the author of such a notice is the person who first ascribes meaning to it, even when this implies that the notice existed as an object for sometime before its author constituted it as a meaningful text. The case of apparently accidental texts, such as the well-rehearsed example of the monkey who types *Hamlet*, closely resembles that of public notices[27]. We have the monkey who creates the *Hamlet* manuscript as an object and Shakespeare who first made any such utterance, but neither seems suitable as the author of the manuscript. Rather, we can say that the author is the person who first ascribes meaning to it.

In many cases, the author of a text is also its creator. Sometimes, however, the creator does not ascribe any meaning to the creation and so cannot be the author of a meaningful text. The author of the text in these cases is the person who first ascribes meaning to it. This separation of author and creator seems paradoxical only if we wrongly reduce the meaning

26 For the claim that texts have authors only if they can be interpreted in numerous ways, see Nehamas, Alexander, "What an Author Is", p. 685.

27 Accidental utterances also would include the computer-generated ones invoked against intentionalism by George Dickie (*Aesthetics: An Introduction*, Indianopolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971, p. 112).

of a text to the conscious, prior purposes of its author. If we do this, we set up a rigid distinction between author and reader in a way that encourages us to equate authorship with creation. In contrast, once we recognise that a text is a site at which various individuals locate diverse meanings, we can allow that authors and readers ascribe meanings to texts in similar processes. Allowing this then encourages us, moreover, to distinguish the ascription of meaning from the act of creation. There is nothing paradoxical, therefore, in the idea that the author of an utterance might be not its creator but the first reader to ascribe meaning to it.

In our view, texts do no possess innate meanings but rather are given meanings by authors and readers alike. This pragmatic theory of the text resembles that of the reception theorists. Although the author first assigns meaning to the text, its meaning is not restricted to that its author intended or even could have intended. Rather, its future meaning is established in the act of its being read. The author locates the first work at the site of the text, but later readers can locate entirely different works at the same site. The text comes to bear various meanings as a result of being read by different people in different places and at different times. Thus, we can talk of the meaning of a text going beyond the intentions of its author or of the author having little control over its meaning. Similarly, because every time people read a text, they ascribe meaning to it, we can talk of each reading being a creative act; we can talk of the gradual unfolding of a text's significance, the constant proliferation of its meanings, and the impossibility of pinning down every meaning it might bear[28]. Some interpreters have long been interested in how a text has been read or how a thinker's reputation has waxed and waned. A pragmatic theory of the text clarifies our conceptualisation of such issues. It provides us with helpful heuristic hints based on a greater methodological sophistication[29]. More particularly, a pragmatic theory of the text draws our attention to the processes through which beliefs and texts acquire authority. Interpreters might examine how beliefs and texts are established, neglected, and promoted within public discourses and social practices. By doing so, moreover, they might undertake a genealogical critique of a received canon of texts or of a social ideology.

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28 *Cf.* LaCapra, Dominick, *o.c.*; Ricoeur, Paul, *o.c.*

29 A pragmatic theory of the text inspires, for example, the seven heuristic theses listed in Jauss, Hans Robert, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory", in: Cohe, Ralph (ed.), *New Directions in Literary History*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974, pp. 11-41.

Consider first how a pragmatic theory of the text encourages interpreters to explore the changing horizon of expectations within which people placed various works at the site of a text. Any received canon or dominant ideology probably will appear here as one gradually established and modified through changing readings inspired by diverse interests, concerns, and criteria of excellence. Canons and ideologies are not natural, self-evident, or given phenomena, but rather created objects open to contestation. Consider next how a pragmatic theory of the text encourages interpreters to explore the synchronic and diachronic relationships between works. Texts, traditions, and even social practices are composed in part of works that draw on, mimic, and contest one another in a variety of ways. Often received canons and social ideologies can be shown to rest on grotesque over-simplifications of the relationships between various works. In political thought, for example, the canon suggests that Locke intended the *Two Treatises* as a response to Hobbes in a way he simply did not[30]. Consider finally how a pragmatic theory of the text encourages interpreters to explore the social contexts in which works and texts are produced and distributed. Interpreters generally have not paid sufficient attention to questions of format, pricing, and other publishing and retail practices, all of which influence who reads, what, how, and why. Equally important here are cultural and social institutions, including reviews, advertising, universities, churches, and political parties, all of which promote or hide certain works from various audiences. Interpreters who explored such matters might show us how received canons and social ideologies are given authority and institutionalised not solely in reasoned debate but also in political struggles characterised by unequal relations of power.

Although our pragmatic theory of the text resembles that of the reception theorists, there are important differences here. Reception theorists often divorce the meaning of a text entirely from the intentions of its author. Sometimes they draw on a phenomenological scepticism to suggest that we understand the past only in a dialogue with it and that this precludes a focus on authorial intentions[31]. According to phenomenological sceptics, the way in which readers understand a text reflects their presuppositions[32]. Reception theorists imply that this phenomenological scepticism shows that

30 *Cf.* Dunn, John, *The Political Theory of John Locke*. More generally, *cf.* Skinner, Quentin, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas".

31 Critiques of intentionalism based on this argument, include LaCapra, Dominick, *Rethinking Intellectual Hystory*; and Keane, John, "More Theses on the Philosophy of History", in Tully, James (ed.), pp. 204-217.

32 A position associated principally with Gadamer.

we can never recover the authorial intention behind a text, so we should concentrate on the meaning of the text as it has been produced by a continuous stream of creative readings. Yet phenomenological scepticism cannot do the work reception theorists here ask it to. If we cannot have access to past meanings, we cannot recover the ways in which readers responded to texts as well as authorial intentions. There are only two viable responses to phenomenological scepticism. The first is: if we believe the limitations of human understanding make interpretation impossible, we will focus solely on what texts mean to us, knowing full well that we can not recover either the intentions of the authors of these texts or the meanings these texts have had for other readers[33]. The second is: if we believe the limits of human understanding make interpretation difficult but not impossible, we will try to recover the meaning of texts to authors and readers alike.

Reception theory seems to be on firmer ground when it relies solely on the suggestion that the study of texts cannot just be a study of authorial intentions. Even here, however, reception-theory is lopsided. Imagine that we want to write a study of the ways in which readers have understood the *Two Treatises* through the ages. When we want to know what someone took the *Two Treatises* to mean, presumably we will study the writings, or possibly the actions, of that person. We will still focus therefore on authorial intentions; it is just that the relevant authorial intentions now lie in the texts in which the readers of the *Two Treatises* expressed their understanding of it. In this way, whenever we shift our focus away from the author, we turn our attention to another work, and presumably another text, so we can talk of the meaning of a work being bound by the intentions of its author. Again, because every time people read a text, they create a new meaning, we can talk about every reading of a text producing a new work with a meaning composed of the intention of its author. Reception theorists are far too ardent in their attacks on the author.

Even if our pragmatic theory of the text does not quite restrict the role of the interpreter to the recovery of authorial intentions, it definitely allows us to declare some ways of approaching texts to be inappropriately conceived of as instances of interpretation. Procedural individualism requires interpreters who want to ascribe a meaning to a text to specify for whom it had that meaning. Because texts do not have structural or innate meanings, any claim that a text had a meaning must entail a claim that it did so for one or more individual who at least in principle could be specified. Thus, the ascription of a meaning to a text cannot properly be conceived of as an

33 *Cf.* Fish, Satnley, *o.c.*

act of interpretation if the individual for whom it had that meaning is not another person. There is nothing wrong with people saying that a text means something to them: it is just that these meanings are better conceived of as attempts to create new meanings –which we have no way of judging the truth of– rather than as attempts to interpret anything. Again, there is nothing wrong with people finding interesting ideas in a text and writing about these ideas: it is just that unless they give evidence to suggest some other person understood the utterance to convey these ideas, these meanings too will be attempts to create new meanings rather than attempts to interpret anything. As interpreters, we must study meanings that actually existed, or exist, for people other than ourselves; we must study works even if we do so to uncover the diverse meanings that a text has been made to bear.

Conclusion

Texts are the main source of our knowledge of human life. Yet recent debates, inspired by post-structuralism, deconstruction, and reception theory have shown the concept of a text to be highly complex and contentious. Against the background of these debates, we have defended an analysis of the text as a site at which individuals locate diverse meanings. Texts are meaningful objects. Objects become meaningful by virtue of individuals attaching meanings to them. Every time someone attaches a meaning to an object, they create a work. The text is the site at which individuals thus locate their works.

Our pragmatic theory of the text overlaps with, but also differs from, those associated with post-structuralism, deconstruction, and reception theory. Consider first the question of the stability of the text. Here we accepted that the text is ambiguous while denying that it is unknowable or indeterminate. Because the text can be the site of very different works, it has no single correct meaning or even set of meanings. However, at any moment the text consists of a given set of works the meanings of which are fixed by the intentions of their authors. Consider next the question of the relationship of textual meaning to authorial intention. Here we echoed several insights reception theory derives from recognition of the creative nature of the reading process. We encouraged the exploration of the changing horizon of expectations surrounding texts, the synchronic and diachronic relationships between works, and the social and cultural processes through which works and texts are produced, distributed, and accorded authority. Nonetheless, we did not follow reception theory, or post-structuralism and

deconstruction, in preaching "the death of the author"[34]. Because the content of a work is given by the mental activity of its author, the content of a text at any moment in time is defined by the mental activity of those individuals who have associated works with it. In a sense, therefore, to study the meaning of a text is always to study authorial intentions[35].

[34] *Cf.* Barthes, Roland, "The Death of the Author", in: *Image, Music, Text*, pp. 142-148; and Foucault, Michel, "What is an Author?".

[35] An earlier version of this paper appeared in *International Philosophical Quarterly*.