

Intentions in the Experience of Meaning

RAYMOND W. GIBBS, JR.

University of California, Santa Cruz



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge cb2 2ru, UK www.cup.cam.ac.uk
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA www.cup.org
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

© Cambridge University Press 1999

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1999

Printed in the United States of America

Typeface Palatino VIP 11/13 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [tb]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gibbs, Raymond W.

Intentions in the experience of meaning / Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

isbn 0-521-57245-2 (hardcover). – isbn 0-521-57630-x (pbk.)

1. Meaning (Psychology) 2. Intentionalism. I. Title.

bf463.m4g53 1999

121'.68 – dc21 98-50661

isbn 0 521 57245 2 hardback

isbn 0 521 57630 x paperback

Contents

Acknowledgments page vii

Part I

INTRODUCTION 1

Chapter 1

THE CONTROVERSY OVER INTENTIONS 3

Part II

SEARCHING FOR INTENTIONS 19

Chapter 2

INTENTIONS AND INTENTIONAL ACTION 21

Chapter 3

MEANING AND COMMUNICATION 40

Chapter 4

INFERRING INTENTIONALITY IN EXPERIENCE 69

Part III

INTENTIONS IN DISCOURSE 107

Chapter 5

SPOKEN LANGUAGE 109

Chapter 6

SAYING WHAT WE DON'T MEAN 143

Chapter 7

WRITING AND READING 176

Contents

Part IV

INTENTIONS IN CRITICISM 203

Chapter 8

QUESTIONS OF AUTHORSHIP 205

Chapter 9

LITERARY INTERPRETATION AND CRITICISM 234

Chapter 10

INTERPRETING THE LAW 273

Chapter 11

UNDERSTANDING ART 293

Part V

CONCLUSION 323

Chapter 12

THE INTENTIONAL MIND 325

Notes 339

Name Index 400

Subject Index 409

Chapter 1

The Controversy over Intentions

Our intentions to say or perform certain acts appear to have an intimate relationship with how people interpret what we are doing. Suppose I ask a good friend *Have you seen the latest Woody Allen movie?* I may have a whole range of intentions and goals that motivate my asking this particular question. For instance, I may intend to engage my friend in a discussion about the movie, I may want to use this utterance as a way of inviting my friend to see the movie with me, I may want to use this question to accuse my friend of not being up on the contemporary movie scene, and so on. But do any of these various intentions play a role in my friend's interpretation of my question?

My friend might simply interpret the meaning of my question about the latest Woody Allen movie not by assessing anything about my specific communicative intentions. She might, instead, determine what my question means from a linguistic analysis of the words in my utterance in combination with her knowledge of English grammar. Perhaps my friend will use her understanding of the context in which I uttered my question to determine its meaning, again, without trying to read my mind as to the intentions behind my question.

Similar questions may be asked about how readers interpret written texts. Imagine that you pick up your local newspaper one morning and see the following headline on the front page: *Drunk gets nine months in violin case.* How might you decide that a reasonable interpretation of this headline is that some drunk person was sentenced to a prison term of nine months in regard to the possible theft of a violin and *not* that some drunk person was

Introduction

put *inside* a violin case for nine months? Do you understand what is meant by this phrase merely by analyzing the words' meanings in the context of what newspaper headlines often express? Or do you try to infer something about the possible intentions of the headline writer in phrasing the headline in the particular way he or she did?

More dramatically, imagine that you are reading the famous poem by Archibald MacLeish entitled "Ars Poetica" that begins:¹

A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit,
Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb,
Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown –
A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds.

MacLeish may have written these lines to express many ideas. He may have intended for you to understand his vision of poetry as part of nature, or how poetics conveys meaning by spatial language, or even how poems refer to themselves while presenting descriptions of the external world. Once again, you must ask which, if any, of MacLeish's putative intentions play a role in your interpretation of his poem.

This book explores the role that communicative intentions play in people's experience of meaning. My aim is to demonstrate that many aspects of how we understand spoken language, interpret written texts, and make sense of artworks, is to a significant extent influenced by the search for communicative intentions. We do not necessarily seek to recover the specific intentions of the actual person who produces some discourse or artwork. Yet much of what we do when understanding meaning is guided by the assumption that some individual, whom we may not even know, said or created what he or she did for a particular set of reasons that we are to recognize. I will not argue that intentions completely limit both ordinary and scholarly interpretation, but I shall claim that the recovery of communicative intentions is an

The Controversy over Intentions

essential part of the cognitive processes that operate when we understand human action of any sort.

There has been continuing debate on the place of intentions in theories of linguistic and nonlinguistic interpretation. On an intuitive level, it makes good sense to describe communication in terms of intentions and inferences about a speaker's or author's meaning. We ordinarily attribute intentions to other people and animals in a wide variety of everyday interactions. Although there has been a great deal of effort given to understanding human behavior in terms of different systems of signs, as witnessed by the study of semiotics, human behavior is predominately conceptualized in intentional rather than physical terms.

The idea that communication exploits the human ability to attribute intentions to other people has always had great psychological appeal. This is seen most forcefully in how we understand utterances in conversation. Imagine a situation in which my roommate says to me one morning *The cat is on the mat*. I clearly interpret this utterance based on my assumptions about my roommate's likely intentions in saying what she did; for example, that she wants me to go let the cat outside. In this way, my interpretation of *The cat is on the mat* is closely tied to my recovery of the speaker's communicative intentions.

Speakers' intentions can be misunderstood, particularly in certain types of communicative situations where people are trying to get their own way (e.g., when making requests, excuses, explanations of behavior). For example, one couple recalled a typical argument in which both maintained that they had not gone to a party because the other had not wanted to go.² Each partner denied having expressed any disinclination to go. In this case, the mixup was traced to the following reconstructed conversation:

Wife: John's having a party. Wanna go?

Husband: OK.

(Later)

Wife: Are you sure you want to go to the party?

Husband: OK, let's not go. I'm tired anyway.

Introduction

When the couple later discussed the misunderstanding, the wife reported that she had merely been asking what her husband wanted to do without considering her own preference. She claimed that she was about to go to the party for her husband's sake and tried to make sure of his preference by asking him a second time. The wife felt she was being solicitous and considerate. The husband said that by bringing up the question of the party, his wife was letting him know that she wanted to go, so he agreed. But when she brought it up again, he thought that she was letting him know that she had changed her mind and now did not want to go. So he found a reason not to go, to make her feel all right about getting her way. Thus, the husband was also being solicitous and considerate. This example shows how people can misunderstand the communicative intentions of others even when both conversants were being attentive and polite.

Of course, there are moments in everyday conversation when listeners openly resist acknowledging their recognition of speakers' intentions. A nice illustration of this is seen in Ingmar Bergman's film *Scenes from a Marriage*.³ The couple, Marianne and Johann, have decided to end their marriage and meet in Johann's office to sign the divorce papers. As they talk about their relationship, Marianne says:

Marianne (gently): I want you to know that I'm nearly always thinking of you and wondering if you're lonely and afraid. Every day, several times a day, I wonder where I went wrong. What I did to cause the breach between us. I know it's a childish way of thinking, but there you are. Sometimes I seem to have got hold of the situation, then it slips through my fingers.

Johann (sarcastically): Why don't you go to a psychiatrist?

Throughout the film, Marianne and Johann talk of their sadness over the deterioration, and ultimate break-up, of their relationship. They express their thoughts and feelings in different ways, but both Marianne and Johann collude to ignore what the other is attempting to communicate. In the above scene, Marianne tries to talk plainly of her feelings to draw Johann closer to her, yet Johann

The Controversy over Intentions

clearly rebuffs Marianne. This practice of ignoring or deflecting speakers' transparent communicative intentions occurs in many discourse situations. Yet the fact that someone's communicative intentions must be dealt with in some way, even if this means resisting them, reveals the salience of speakers' intentions in our understanding of what is said.

Conversations like the above raise the thorny question, once more, of how best to define what constitutes a speaker's communicative intention. Should we distinguish between what a person communicates quite specifically by virtue of what he or she says from what that person hopes to achieve by virtue of the listener's recognizing the communicative intention? I will suggest that it makes good sense to limit communicative intentions to what speakers say (e.g., Marianne talking of her feelings), and not confuse discussion of these intentions with what speakers (or writers and artists) hope to concretely realize by what is said (e.g., Marianne's hope to draw Johann closer to her as a result of his understanding her communicative intention).

Although intentions seem most transparently at play in face-to-face conversation, they also shape our interpretation of written texts where, in most instances, the writer is not physically present. Our reading of what many texts mean seems inseparable from our awareness of who the author is who penned the work. Reading a letter from one's mother, a best friend, or a lover, creates an experience in which we almost hear the author's voice speaking to us. Even when we don't personally know the author, we struggle to understand a writer's communicative intentions when reading most texts. Consider the following example of a letter to a newspaper advice columnist.⁴

Dear Etiquette Expert:

My girlfriend and I are ready to get married in a few months. She has been hounding me to get an engagement ring. But I don't see why it's so important to buy an expensive ring when it's the love that counts. If two people love each other, why does the man have to prove it by buying her an expensive ring?

This letter illustrates that a writer might have a diversity of

Introduction

communicative goals: for example, to get a problem solved, to draw the reader's attention to an issue, to solicit agreement on an argument, to get into print, and so on. Here the etiquette expert has the task of determining which of these goals are primary in order to supply a useful response to the letter writer. Moreover, there are other agents involved in the interpretation of this letter, such as other potential letter writers, readers of the newspaper, the editors and publishers of the newspaper, and so on. Letters like this one are hardly simple and show how, in some cases anyway, understanding what a writer intends to communicate may involve multiple agents with multiple intentions. At the same time, people's interpretations of what a writer says will also differ depending upon their own attitudes and beliefs about the writer. For instance, some readers might think the writer of the above letter is simply "cheap" and unwilling to express his love for his fiancée in the traditional manner. Other readers might have great sympathy with the writer for wanting to place his love for his fiancée above traditional, material values.

There are other cases where we may not personally know the author, but know of the author and his or her beliefs through previous works. In these instances, we often create in our minds a sense of someone familiar talking to us with specific communicative intentions that we are to recognize and appreciate. Consider this example from a popular movie review column, "Joe Bob Goes to the Drive-In," written by Joe Bob Briggs.⁵

So this flick starts off with a bimbo getting chained up and killed by a bunch of Meskins dressed up like Roman soldiers in their bathrobes... Sixty-four dead bodies. Bimbos in cages. Bimbos in chains. Arms roll. Thirty-nine breasts. Two beasts (giants lizard, octopus). Leprosy. Kung fu. Bimbo fu. Sword fu. Lizard fu. Knife fu. Seven battles. Three quarts blood. A 39 on the vomit meter... Joe Bob says check it out.

Joe Bob Briggs's movie reviews are not exactly inspired literature, and to some readers are quite offensive. But many readers recognize the satirical intent of the writer, whose real name is John Bloom, a young Dallas newspaper reporter. Bloom's idea for his column was to review "bad" movies, but to do so from

The Controversy over Intentions

the vantage point of a viewer who could discriminate between what was good and what was bad in a “bad” film. As a satirist, Bloom allowed his narrator, Joe Bob Briggs, to talk in his own language in order to target contemporary attitudes about “taste.” Bloom even gave Joe Bob his own special identity as a redneck working man who at nineteen has been married three times and literally seen sixty-eight hundred movies, which gives him great authority as a drive-in movie reviewer.

Of course, like all satirists, Bloom takes an enormous risk in writing this column. Problems soon arose after he started publishing it as to whether the column was making fun of Joe Bob or of the people Joe Bob writes about (e.g., *Meskins*, *Bimbos*, etc). Predictably, some readers view Joe Bob as a Southern cracker being satirized for their amusement, while others, such as the Baptists and some feminists, are offended by Joe Bob’s passion for violence and sex. Yet other feminists get angry at the angry feminists for not recognizing that the column was simply poking fun at the kind of people who go to the types of movies reviewed in Joe Bob Briggs’s column. All of this goes to show how readers’ different views about who an author is, and what that author’s motives are in writing as he or she does, has an enormous influence on how people interpret the meaning of texts. Moreover, it is clear that a reader’s attitudes toward the author and the topic discussed have a great bearing on the interpretations given to any text.

These observations on speech and written texts point directly to the strong conclusion that recognition of speakers’/writers’ intentions play an important part in how we understand language. Over the past twenty-five years, much research in cognitive science – which includes parts of the disciplines of psychology, philosophy, linguistics, computer science, neuroscience, and anthropology – has been devoted to the question of whether intentions have a significant role in the experience of meaning, especially in regard to how people interpret linguistic communication.⁶ Although other approaches to linguistic meaning are widely pursued, such as truth-conditional semantics, it is widely assumed that understanding many aspects of linguistic meaning crucially depends on recognizing speakers’/authors’ intentions. Cognitive scientists have, for example, learned a great deal

Introduction

about how speakers/authors express their intentions and how listeners/readers figure out exactly what it is that others wish to communicate. A variety of theoretical proposals and empirical findings suggest that a critical part of the unconscious and conscious mental activities involved in speaking and listening, and in writing and reading, center on the expression and recovery of communicative intentions. Part of my goal in this book is to illustrate that determining the role of intentions in the interpretation of meaning depends on the recognition that speakers/listeners, authors/readers, artists/observers are engaging in cognitive, psychological activities that can be empirically studied and understood.

Despite our strong intuitions, and much of the evidence from cognitive science, that understanding what a speaker, author, or artist means depends critically on inferring something about that person's communicative intentions, there have for decades been fierce arguments in scholarly and public circles about the role of intentions in the interpretation of linguistic and nonlinguistic meaning. *Intentionalism*, the idea that speakers' or authors' intentions place constraints on linguistic and artistic interpretation, has been most widely debated in the humanities. One quote from Peter Kivy nicely captures the fever of the debate over intentionalism: "The mere mention of the word 'intention' in regard to any art-critical or art-theoretical question is liable to elicit, these days, the most violent reaction, as if one had just dropped a snake in a crowded room."⁷

Many literary critics in the early twentieth century argued that an author's intentions place significant constraints on how one should interpret the meaning of any literary work. Thus, readers presumably determine the meaning of the opening lines of MacLeish's poem "Ars Poetica" – *A poem should be palpable and mute / As a globed fruit* – based on the recognition of certain intentions that they believe MacLeish wishes them to recover. Readers, especially literary critics, might, for example, try to interpret MacLeish's poem in light of their knowledge of MacLeish, his various life experiences, his pronounced goals as a poet, and so on.

In the 1940s and 1950s, however, intentionalism suffered its first major blow with the rise of New Criticism and its influential

The Controversy over Intentions

doctrine, called the *intentional fallacy*, which states that interpretation of texts should be freed from historical and biographical influences.⁸ Thus, when readers formulate a critical interpretation of MacLeish's "Ars Poetica," they should restrict their analyses to the possible meanings *in the text* and neither speculate about MacLeish's possible reasons for writing the poem in the way he did nor refer to any information about MacLeish in passing critical judgment on his poem. With the rise of New Criticism, a whole generation of scholars felt they needed to tiptoe delicately and apologetically around any suggestion that they were interested in authorial intentions as part of their critical analyses of literary texts. As the poets/critics Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot had argued earlier, textual meaning should be independent of authorial intentions because the best poetry is objective, autonomous, and impersonal and should continue to express meaning long after it has been disassociated from the person who wrote it.⁹

From the 1960s to the 1990s other philosophers and literary critics declared their own beliefs in the intentional fallacy. Poststructuralists such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault announced the "death of the author" as a precondition for the desired "birth of the reader" in literary criticism.¹⁰ Though authors may think they know what they intend, their thought and language are at the mercy of socioeconomic, psychological, and historical forces that cause them to mean something other than what they frequently intend. This blindness makes what authors intend far less interesting than the operation of these external forces as revealed in their work.¹¹

Anti-intentionalist theorists and critics have argued that textual meaning can be determined by conducting close analyses of the "meanings in the text," uncovering the hidden political/historical/cultural forces that shape texts, or even deconstructed by recognizing the infinite number of possible meanings that a text can offer in the "endless web of texts past and present."¹² Once again, what an original author might have intended to communicate in writing has little or no value in determining how a text should be construed. Similar claims have been advanced for how critics should interpret artworks, in that what an artist might have

Introduction

intended to convey should pose no limits on the interpretations observers can give to these artworks.

The rise of anti-intentionalism over the past fifty years has not gone unchallenged. Several prominent literary scholars and philosophers since the 1960s have rebutted the contention that reliance on authorial intentions is the *only* way to objectively adjudicate between competing interpretations of a text.¹³ Without some appeal to what authors specifically intend to communicate, literary criticism falls victim to needless relativism where every interpretation of a text is about as good as any other reading. Other scholars have gone so far as to argue that the meanings of texts are identical to authorial intentions and, therefore, that there are no theoretical or practical consequences to intentionalism.¹⁴

How literary texts should be interpreted is not the only arena in which contests over the importance of authorial intentions are fought. The question of how authorial intentions inform our understanding of language has its greatest social significance, perhaps, in debates on the interpretation of legal texts. Jurists and legal theorists face the issue of whether the United States Constitution or, indeed, any legal document should be interpreted according to the original authors' intentions.¹⁵ This battle was brought to the public's attention most forcefully during the 1985 Senate confirmation hearings on President Reagan's nominee to the Supreme Court, Robert Bork.¹⁶ Advocates of "originalism" like Bork argued that the proper aim of constitutional interpretation is to understand and deploy the intentions of the framers. Under this view, interpretation organizes textuality as the place where an author's intentions are represented in language: originalism posits interpretation as a process of deriving, according to the relevant aesthetic/political/moral values, what that intention is, and hence, what the text "means." The originalists propose the doctrine of "original intent" to promote judicial neutrality and fidelity to the Constitution.¹⁷ For example, many originalists argue that the Supreme Court should not support a woman's right to abortion because it was never the intention of the original framers of the Constitution back in 1789 to permit such activities under the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution. How

The Controversy over Intentions

jurists conceive of the place of authorial intentions in textual interpretation clearly affects the lives of ordinary citizens.

The struggle over intentions in our understanding of human acts is not limited to the domain of linguistic meanings. We also ask ourselves whether intentions play any role in our experience of meaning when viewing artworks or listening to music. When listening to, for instance, Beethoven's Sixth Symphony, do people sense that Beethoven specifically desired for them to experience particular aesthetic responses to different parts of his composition? What role, if any, do the composer's artistic intentions play in people's understandings of avant-garde performances such as John Cage's silent composition *4'33"*? What meanings, if any, did artists such as Jackson Pollack and Mark Rothko intend for us to recognize in viewing their various nonrepresentational paintings? Modern painting and sculpture puts into sharp focus the battle over "authorial" intentions as ordinary spectators and art critics strive to make sense of an artist's work. People can't help but ask what artists like Pollack or Cage might have been attempting to achieve when they created their artworks. In a related way, it is almost impossible for us to view van Gogh's later paintings and not think about the sliced-off ear, the suicide, and how the whirling landscapes might be the result of unconscious impulses that drove van Gogh to paint as he did. Most generally, who a speaker, reader, or artist is and what he or she might be trying to communicate seems inextricably a part of the interpretations people give to speakers, texts, and artworks.

Do speakers, authors and artists have any natural rights over the interpretation of their creations? Very few critics or scholars would argue that what a speaker, author, or artist explicitly intended to communicate fixes, once and for all, what any utterance, text, or artwork means. People clearly bring their own biases into interpreting human artifacts. It is no surprise that responses to any specific utterance, poem, or artwork will vary considerably across individuals.

Yet discussions about what a speaker, author, or artist means don't easily settle into the radical subjectivist position where each person creates his or her own meaning. Listeners, readers, observers, and critics of art most often contend that some

Introduction

interpretations of a human artifact are more correct, or at least more permissible, than others. Few of us, for example, would agree with Charles Manson's reading of the Beatles song "Helter Skelter" as a plea for a race war in America.¹⁸ Part of the reason we reject Manson's interpretation of "Helter Skelter" rests with our tacit belief that John Lennon didn't entertain any such thoughts in writing this song, nor did he wish for us to assume any such communicative intentions on his part. Artists often debate, refute, or outright reject interpretations of their work. This is precisely what Georgia O'Keefe did during her lifetime when she repeatedly denied critical interpretations of both the erotic content and feminist intent of her paintings.

The scholarly debate over intentionalism touches on many interesting questions and topics that will be addressed in the chapters that follow. Are "meanings" and "intentions" similar, related, or entirely different concepts? Are intentions best understood as private mental events that precede individual actions, or are they better characterized as emergent properties of collaborative interactions among people? What constitutes an "author" (e.g., what do we do with texts written by multiple authors with possibly competing intentions, when we have no idea who wrote a text or when it was composed)? Do authors, or even speakers, have any special authority in interpreting what their own texts possibly mean? What criteria should be applied in specifying a person's communicative intentions? Should critics consult the author, her diary, her psychiatrist or even her astrologer? Can people ever, under any circumstances, really know what an individual's true intentions are in saying or writing or creating what he or she did? How can scholars account for metaphor and irony, cases of language that seem to demand that we recognize that speakers/writers intend something different from what their words conventionally mean? Does it *ever* matter who speaks, writes, or creates something? How are we to interpret literary texts or artworks that are claimed to have been created by someone other than the person(s) who actually produced the artwork? What are judges and lawyers to do when they interpret legal texts and apply these interpretations in making judicial decisions? Do people ground their interpretations of meaning differently across

The Controversy over Intentions

cultures? What does it even mean to say that anyone has *interpreted* someone's utterance, text, or artwork?

Despite the tremendous, continuing debates about intentions in the humanities, there is surprisingly little discussion in the cognitive sciences of the possibility that communicative intentions are ephemeral by-products of linguistic understanding rather than the foundation for utterance interpretation.¹⁹ Until now, cognitive scientists have not seriously responded to the current challenges regarding intentions in communication. My aim in this book is to address the controversy over intentionalism from an interdisciplinary perspective, one that acknowledges the variety of viewpoints on intentions, meanings, and interpretations in both the humanities and cognitive science. Much of the debate over whether communicative intentions constrain the interpretation of meaning rests with scholars' very different accounts of what it means to interpret any utterance, text, or artwork. How ordinary readers, listeners, and expert critics understand and form interpretations of meaning requires cognitive effort that takes place in real time, starting with the first moments when people move their eyes across the page, hear the first few notes of a sonata, or glance at a painting, up to later moments when we consciously, deliberately reflect upon what has been seen or read. Understanding and interpreting are fundamental processes of the human mind. Yet the surprising fact about debates on intentionalism is that critics often ignore considerations of what is known about how people actually experience meaning, including the possibility that people immediately, and unconsciously, seek out authorial intentions when they read, listen, or observe human artifacts.

This book describes in greater detail the extent to which meaningful experience is, and is not, shaped by people's assumptions about the communicative intentions of others. Understanding how people ordinarily create interpretations of the acts they see or hear requires a detailed examination of human cognitive processes as these operate moment-to-moment in everyday life. Fortunately, extensive work in the cognitive sciences reveals important insights into ordinary, unreflective, as well as reflective, cognitive processes, that tell us a good deal about the possible role of intentions in the experience of meaning. My strategy in

Introduction

exploring intentions in meaningful experience adopts what might be called the *cognitive intentionalist premise*:

People bring their ordinary human dispositions to understand what other people are saying or doing in interpreting nonlinguistic, linguistic, and artistic acts. Our interest in communing with the intentions of others is so deeply a part of how people construct meaningful interpretations of artifacts that we sometimes think that the search for intentions is optional and therefore can be abandoned if desired. Yet an explicit search for the psychological underpinnings of human action will reveal the fundamental importance of communicative intentions in many aspects of meaningful experience.

Adopting the cognitive intentionalist premise constrains me to systematically explore the possibility that our assumptions about people as intentional agents place significant limits on both the creation and interpretation of meaningful experience. My exploration of intentions in meaningful experience is guided by two primary commitments: (a) a commitment to seek general principles governing all aspects of how people experience meaning (the generalization commitment); and (b) a commitment to make my account of meaningful experience consistent with what is known about human cognition (the cognitive commitment). I do not assume that meaningful experience *must* always be directly linked to human intentions. But I don't reject the possibility that intentionalism has little to offer in explaining how people create and understand meaning in everyday life, in different cultural contexts, and in special scholarly, interpretive activities.

Of course, many scholars disagree with my strategy in exploring the consequences of intentionalism. They argue that it is nearly impossible to accurately know the intentions of others. For these scholars, it is far better to focus on the meaning in the work itself, apart from considering anything about the human agents who created the work, or to focus on different idiosyncratic interpretive strategies, than it is to propose accounts of meaningful interpretation based on unreliable readings of other people's minds. These scholars maintain that looking solely at human intentions misses the critical contribution of historical, political, and

The Controversy over Intentions

cultural forces in the creation and experience of meaning. Seeking what is meaningful about human artifacts, and the ways they are meaningful, demands the privileged exploration of these different forces.

Yet my concern with understanding the psychological reality of meaningful experience attempts to situate historical, political, and cultural forces within the context of how people actively seek to make sense of their experiences. Many postmodernists, for example, attempt to render invisible the meaning that arises in interpretive experience. These scholars claim to be justified in doing this because they are revealing hidden social and historical forces outside the awareness of the creators and interpreters of human artifacts. However, postmodern scholars only talk about possible theoretical factors rather than focusing on genuine social and historical processes within which people experience meaning. My aim is to show how intentions can be described not as a mere matter of recovering the disembodied meanings in individual minds, but as dynamic, emergent properties of interactive social/cultural/historical moments within which people create and make sense of different human artifacts.

A significant portion of this book is devoted to exploring not just whether assumptions about intentions constrain meaningful experience, but to explaining how people's assumptions and their coordinated, collaborative interactions with others give rise to meaning, even in cases where there is no face-to-face contact between creator and observer (author and reader). I will strongly reject the idea that our experience of meaning rests primarily with locating the meaning "in" human artifacts. Theorists too often seek to find supposedly fixed "meanings" or "thoughts" or "intentions" underlying human discourse, with the entities being described as rules, conventions, representations, or theories. Yet it is something other than rules, conventions, representations, or theories that make communication possible. As Russian linguistic and literary scholar V. Voloshinov put it, "meaning belongs to a word in its position between speakers (at the moment of its utterance), that is, meaning is realized only in the process of active, responsive understanding."²⁰ Even when we know nothing about the person(s) responsible for an artifact, we still construct

Introduction

interpretations of artifacts, to a large extent, around the belief that some person created an artifact with a communicative purpose in mind. What any human artifact means is best characterized in terms of what a speaker, author, or artist meant to communicate successfully given the linguistic, cultural, and artistic conventions in place at the time the work was created. This account doesn't deny that people sometimes fail to recognize communicative intentions, or that conventions sometimes clash with what people intend to communicate. Yet in each case of meaningful experience, the recognition of what is intentional about human artifacts places significant constraints on how we make interpretive judgments.

The cognitive intentionalist perspective adopted here will not necessarily resolve all of the debates about the role of communicative intentions in the experience of meaning. We will continue to take the paradoxical stance of wanting to ground meaningful interpretation in the communicative intentions of others while, at the same time, not wanting to be limited by what other people intend by what they say, write, or do. My argument, though, is that understanding something about how the human mind constructs meaningful patterns from what is heard, read, or observed should help mediate some of the disputes about intentionalism in contemporary academia and popular culture.