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How to be an Intentionalist

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ABSTRACT

The general aim of this paper is to establish the plausibility of a postfoundational intentionalism. Its specific aim is to respond to criticisms of my work made by Vivienne Brown in a paper “On Some Problems with Weak Intentionalism for Intellectual History”. Postfoundationalism is often associated with a new textualism according to which there is no outside to the text. In contrast, I suggest that postfoundationalists can legitimate our postulating intentions, actions, and other historical objects outside of the text. They can do so by reference to, first, philosophical commitments to general classes of objects, and, second, inference to the best explanation with respect to particular objects belonging to such classes. This postfoundational intentionalism sets up a suitable context within which to address Brown’s more specific questions.

How to be an Intentionalist

One strand within the linguistic turn in the human sciences has emphasized the inescapability of textuality: it has made familiar what once were shocking phrases such as everything is text or “there is no ‘outside’ to the text”.¹ Two of the themes conveyed by these phrases are widely shared by participants in the many diverse strands that make up the linguistic turn. The first theme is a postfoundationalism that implies all experience and reasoning is theory-laden as opposed to being concerned with a given object. The second theme is a consequent view of individuals as inherently embedded within social traditions or languages. A third theme conveyed by such phrases is, however, notably more contentious even among those effected by the linguistic turn. This final theme is the idea that historians are trapped in texts so they cannot access, or appeal to, objects outside texts. According to what we might label new textualism, texts – whether written or not – gain meaning only from a chain of signifiers that takes us from text to text without any possibility of our ever bringing this chain to an end by invoking an intention, action, or other object.² What should we make of this new textualism? Can we still be intentionalists in a postfoundational age? Can we reject the third theme even if we accept – as I do – the first two? Vivienne Brown raises these issues for me, and I am grateful to her for so doing. In what follows, I hope fruitfully to address them, as well as her specific questions. (The structure of my essay loosely corresponds to that of Brown’s: the first section defends the possibility of postfoundational intentionalism; the second fills it out by dealing with topics Brown raises in the second part of her paper; and the third uses it to reply to the specific questions she raises in the third part of her paper.)

I. Outside the Text

The distinction between intentionalism and the new textualism is often confused with that between foundationalism and postfoundationalism. Really, we need not equate the two distinctions. To be intentionalists, we need counter only the new textualist view that historians cannot legitimately appeal to intentions in order to bring the alleged play of signifiers to a close; we do not also have to repudiate either postfoundational epistemology or the view that individuals are inherently socially embedded. To rethink the distinction between intentionalism and the new textualism in this way is to raise the possibility of postfoundational intentionalism.

Postfoundational intentionalists share the first of the three themes characterizing the new textualism – we cannot have the pure experience or pure reason we would need to give our knowledge secure foundations. All experiences, including those of texts, are theory-laden: we, at least in part, construct their content through the prior theories we bring to bear upon them. This shared postfoundationalism supports a particular account of the historian's relation to the text. Historians have before them various relics from the past: we can call such a relic, as it is prior to our interpreting it, "the text as a physical object". When historians interpret a text, they ascribe to it a meaning that derives, at least in part, from their prior theories: to indicate the constructed aspect of interpretation, we can call this "the meaning of a text for us".³ Because historians thus, at least in part, construct the meaning a text has for them, we cannot describe them as mere recorders of a pristine intention or past exhibited by a text. It is at this point that postfoundational intentionalists part company with new textualists. New textualists imply that a

postfoundational account of the historian's relationship to the text precludes any appeal to objects outside texts. They argue that because we cannot record a past exhibited by texts, we remain trapped within a world of texts – those we read and those we construct in our readings; we cannot access other objects, such as intentional states, in order to fix, illuminate, or explain textual meanings.⁴ Any interpretation that pursues such an object to ground or give meaning to a text is, they continue, a misconceived, and perhaps unethical, repression of the slippages, playfulness, and difference inherent in textuality. In contrast, postfoundational intentionalists must provide a justification for appealing to objects, specifically intentional states, which are outside texts. They invoke not only “the text as a physical object” and “the meaning of a text for us”, but also “the intentional states of individuals in the past”.

How might we justify appealing to objects outside the text while accepting a postfoundational account of the historian's relationship to the text? My answer appeals to philosophical reasoning to defend commitments to the existence of objects belonging to general classes, and to inference to the best explanation to defend postulating particular instances of these general classes. Postfoundationalism implies that all our experiences, and so all our concepts and beliefs, are laden with our theories in a way that precludes our taking them as straightforward representations of the world. Nonetheless, whenever we act, we thereby commit ourselves to beliefs as provisionally true or adequate to the world. For example, if we feel hungry, go to a café, order a sandwich, pay in cash, and eat it, we commit ourselves to belief in the existence of certain objects – such as bread and money – and about the nature of these objects – such as that food mitigates hunger, that others accept authorized coins in exchange for commodities, and that we can act for reasons of

our own. Philosophy can go to work on the beliefs our actions thus commit us to. It can analyse the implications of these concepts so as to provide an account of the classes of objects with which we populate the world and the forms of reasoning appropriate to such objects. For example, our commitment to bread suggests we populate the world with physical objects, our commitment to money suggests we populate it with objects that acquire significance through inter-subjective beliefs, and our commitment to our being able to act for reasons of our own suggests we populate it with other intentional states. In this way, philosophical analysis of the concepts embedded in our actions provides us with good reason to believe in the existence of objects belonging to certain general classes, including intentional states.

While philosophical reflection on the concepts embedded in our actions provides us with good reasons for postulating the existence of objects belonging to certain general classes, it cannot legitimate our postulating particular instance of these classes. It allows us to claim that people have intentional states, but not to ascribe particular webs of belief to, say, Hobbes and Locke. Postfoundationalism suggests that we have access only to our interpretations of texts, not to any intentional state of the author or reader. Nonetheless, postfoundationalists can justify ascribing a particular web of beliefs to an author or reader as a case of inference to the best explanation. Because we have good reason to populate the world with intentional states such as beliefs, we are justified in assuming a particular individual held a particular web of beliefs. Although historians obviously do not have access to this web of beliefs, they can justify ascribing a web to someone by saying that doing so best explains, or makes sense of, the evidence. For example, philosophy gives us grounds for assuming Hobbes had beliefs that he sought to convey in Leviathan, and

this assumption raises the question of what these beliefs were; historians then can answer this question by saying that ascribing such and such beliefs to Hobbes, rather than others, best makes sense of the facts on which we agree. Inference to the best explanation thus provides the justification for postulating particular intentional states or webs of belief as those held by individuals in the past.

Although we can thus justify appeals to objects outside the text, we still have to acknowledge the theory-laden, and so provisional, nature of any knowledge we claim to have of such objects. Knowledge cannot be certain – based on appeals to pure facts. It must be provisional – justified by an anthropological epistemology that provides criteria in terms of which to compare different interpretations, that is, different sets of postulated historical objects.⁵ Perhaps the new textualists want only to insist on this provisionality. If this is so, however, they have to allow for the existence of a world outside the text, in which case it seems to be incumbent upon them to say more than they have to date about what objects populate this world – do they, for example, believe we should populate this world, at least provisionally, with intentional states? If they do not, what philosophical psychology do they offer as an alternative to that which dominates our daily practices?

Postfoundational intentionalism allows that historians do not have direct access to the past but rather confront a range of texts that they actively interpret. It differs from the new textualism in allowing historians, as part of their interpretations of texts, to postulate intentional states, and other historical objects, and thereby bring to a provisional halt the process of interpretation. The justification for historians postulating objects outside texts derives not from an alleged experience of such objects, but from inference to the best explanation within the context of philosophical commitments entailed by our concepts.

Philosophical reflection gives historians a justification for postulating objects of the general class they do – for example, intentional states such as beliefs. Inference to the best explanation provides them with a justification for postulating a particular set of such objects – for example, a particular web of beliefs as that held by an individual in the past.

II. Beliefs as Intentional States

We have found that postfoundationalists need not conclude that there is no outside to the text. On the contrary, they can defend historians' postulating objects outside of the text by reference to, first, philosophical commitments to general classes of objects, and, second, inference to the best explanation with respect to particular objects belonging to the relevant general classes. To defend postfoundational intentionalism, we need also to establish that intentional states, notably beliefs, are the general class of object that give meaning to texts. My procedural individualism, or weak intentionalism, represents an attempt to do just this.

Having established the possibility of escaping the text to postulate intentional states, we should clarify what it means to say that meanings are intentional. As Brown suggests, my weak intentionalism stands in contrast to a strong intentionalism that reduces all meanings to the prior purposes of authors. I use the term intentional to indicate that an object exists in or for the mind; my weak intentionalism consists of the claim that meanings only exist in or for a mind – meanings are always meanings for specific individuals; it consists of a procedural individualism, according to which when historians claim a text meant such and such, they should be able to specify for whom it did so, whether author or reader. All meanings arise from the intentional states, notably

the beliefs, which individuals attach to texts. To defend this procedural individualism, we need to argue that meanings are always meanings for individuals, not innate or emergent properties of texts or disembodied languages. However, rather than repeating these arguments here – arguments Brown does not question – I want to turn to the questions she does raise, questions that allow me to continue to discuss the nature of the extra-textual objects invoked by postfoundational intentionalism.⁶

I prefaced my response to Brown's questions with discussion of postfoundational intentionalism because many of them seem to me to embody confusion about the status of the beliefs that I would have historians invoke. Brown appears to think that the only options on offer are new textualism and foundationalist intentionalism, and, as a result, she thinks I must be committed to taking at least some of these beliefs to be given by, or present in, texts themselves. In contrast, I am suggesting that all these beliefs – whether expressed or actual – are postulates made by historians.

Brown asks, what are expressed beliefs? Postfoundational intentionalists should reply that they are the beliefs people hoped to express by saying or doing whatever they did. Although historians never have direct access to such beliefs, they legitimately can postulate them as part of their interpretation of the texts before them. Indeed, because historians can study only what Brown calls the text itself, they can justify postulating the expressed beliefs they do only by saying that doing so best makes sense of the text itself. The text itself, however, does not possess agency in the sense of being able to express beliefs. On the contrary, procedural individualism clearly implies that texts only acquire a meaning if individuals ascribe one to them. While people can ascribe a meaning to a text for all sorts of reasons, moreover, historians surely do so in order to attain knowledge

of the past, that is, to postulate objects that we have good reason to believe really existed in the past. Historians thus seek to ascribe to a text the meaning somebody in the past ascribed to it. Of course, historians do not have direct access to the expressed beliefs they thus postulate as those people in the past ascribed to a text: there is nothing outside textuality to which they might appeal to justify postulating the expressed beliefs they do. As we have seen, however, they can still justify their interpretation – their attribution of expressed beliefs to someone in the past – as an inference to the best explanation.

Postfoundational intentionalism implies that texts do not express beliefs, but rather are objects on the basis of which historians attribute beliefs to people from the past. As such, we cannot parse my distinction between expressed and actual beliefs in relation to meanings allegedly inherent within texts. Brown goes awry, then, in equating actual beliefs with those expressed by the text itself in contrast to the beliefs expressed by the author. My distinction between expressed and actual beliefs is, rather, one between two types of belief that historians might postulate as objects that existed in the past. Actual beliefs are those individuals hold and act upon.⁷ Expressed beliefs are those they want to convey by saying what they do: for example, politicians who actually believe government mismanagement caused a depression might nonetheless say that the recession is a product of a global downturn in an attempt to express the belief that the government could not prevent it.

Brown's confusion over the nature of the distinction between expressed and actual beliefs arises, I suspect, because she thinks the text alone could provide evidence, and so express, actual beliefs contrary to those expressed by the author. Hence, she asks, "on what grounds may historians conclude that the beliefs an author expressed in a text

differed from his or her actual beliefs?”⁸ Postfoundational intentionalists should reply by emphasising the holistic nature of historical interpretation. The evidence for disjunctures between actual and expressed beliefs typically derives not so much from the text itself as from other texts. Typically we distinguish between people’s actual and expressed beliefs either because their expressed beliefs do not match with their actions or because we find an odd pattern across a pertinent range of utterances and actions. It is these mismatches and patterns that encourage us to postulate insincerity, the unconscious, and irrationality. Perhaps, however, someone will ask, what justifies historians postulating actual beliefs as “hidden” objects to explain such mismatches and patterns? Once more, postfoundational intentionalists should appeal here to inference to the best explanation in the context of the philosophical commitments embedded within our concepts.

III. Some Answers

Procedural individualism provides an attempt to think through postfoundational intentionalism. Brown asks three specific questions of such intentionalism. In my view, these questions also show her oscillating exclusively between foundationalism and new textualism. On the one hand, the sort of given experiences invoked by foundationalists appear to be the only grounds on which she allows historians to claim knowledge of objects. On the other, she follows the new textualists in denying that texts can provide us with such experiences of intentional states. Postfoundational intentionalism enables us to break out of the restrictions of such a dichotomy.

Brown’s first question is, “how is it that the beliefs expressed by the work constitute a historical meaning when they are different from the beliefs expressed by the

historical individual?" So phrased, the question rests on her confusion over the nature of expressed and actual beliefs. For postfoundational intentionalists, only an individual, not a work, expresses beliefs. What makes meanings historical is that they are meanings for specific individuals; that is to say, they are the meanings specific individuals attached to the text as a physical object at sometime in the past. Such historical meanings consist of expressed beliefs, which might or might not be in accord with the actual beliefs of the individual concerned. In either case, the historian ascribes the beliefs to the individual as part of a creative act of interpretation, not because the beliefs are simply given in the text. The historian is justified in so ascribing beliefs to people because of a combination of philosophical commitments and inference to the best explanation.

Historians can postulate both expressed and actual beliefs as those that people held in the past. Sometimes, moreover, the actual beliefs they ascribe are ones they take people to have held unconsciously. These unconscious beliefs are, however, historical in the same sense as the expressed and actual beliefs we already have considered: that is to say, they are objects that historians postulate as having had a real existence in time. What makes these beliefs historical is the fact that we ascribe to them a temporal existence in the past. When historians ascribe meanings to texts, therefore, they do so by appealing to objects external to those texts – to beliefs, which might be sincere or insincere, conscious or unconscious, rational or irrational. Although historians only have access to the text, they still can legitimately postulate these objects as external to the text in order to ascribe a meaning to it.

Brown's second question concerns the ontological status of these beliefs. In reply, of course, postfoundational intentionalists should say that these beliefs are objects

we postulate, but that we postulate them as having a real existence. Underlying Brown's question, however, there seems to be a reluctance to ascribe real existence to objects that historians postulate but have no access to. While such reluctance befits foundationalists who believe in pure experience, postfoundationalists should respond to it by pointing out that in their view we do not have unmediated access to any object, so all objects to which we ascribe real existence are ones we postulate. Postfoundationalism implies that because all our experiences are laden with our theories, we have access only to our interpretations of the world, not to real objects. Nonetheless, within our interpretations we rightly ascribe a real existence to some objects – the keyboard and computer screen in front of me – on the basis of inference to the best explanation in the context of the philosophical commitments embedded in our practices. The case of intentional states, including actual and expressed beliefs, is no different from these objects. We postulate them as real objects within our interpretations of the world.

Although the foregoing account of the ontological status of beliefs applies to unconscious just as readily as to the conscious, it does not address Brown's question as to what criteria differentiate the two given that historians only have one type of evidence – texts in themselves. This question too has a foundationalist ring to it. It suggests that we can differentiate objects only if they correspond to varied types of evidence. In contrast, postfoundationalism implies that because all knowledge is theory-laden, the justification for distinguishing two kinds of objects depends on doing so helping us to make sense of the evidence. Postfoundational intentionalists thus should reply to Brown by saying that historians should invoke unconscious beliefs when doing so enables them to offer a more compelling account of the past. The relevant criteria are not attached to the evidence, but

rather to the practice in which we judge rival historical narratives. We do not distinguish conscious and unconscious beliefs as atomized units inherent in the evidence. Instead, we introduce both types of belief as and when doing so gives an accurate, comprehensive, consistent, open, fruitful, and progressive account of the past.

Brown's third question concerns the relationship of objectivity in intellectual history and in natural science. To begin, Brown suggests that historians can compare rival historical interpretations only with each other, not extra-textual objects. Contrary to what she suggests, I would agree with her here since I invoke extra-textual objects only as postulates made in interpretations. Thereafter, however, Brown contrasts objectivity in history, so understood, with the objectivity in the natural sciences, where, she implies, we can compare interpretations with a fixed reality. Once again, her position gets too close to foundationalism. Postfoundationalists surely should deny that natural scientists, as well as historians, have pure experiences of an independent reality. In my view, historians and natural scientists alike have theory-laden experiences which they interpret by postulating a range of objects as having a real existence independent of their interpretations. Because these objects are postulates, neither natural scientists nor historians can compare their interpretations with some sort of external fact of the matter. Rather, natural scientists and historians alike can arrive at objective knowledge only through a suitable comparison of the rival merits of the various interpretations on offer. The knowledge at which they thus arrive will be theory-laden and provisional, rather than given and certain, but because they have good reasons for accepting it as true, it still constitutes objective knowledge for them.

IV. Implications

I hope my responses to Brown's questions have been opened novel lines of thought rather than merely restating arguments already made. The most obvious new line of thought is the evaluation of new textualism. In addition, my responses suggest that we should think of the beliefs that historians ascribe to people in the past not as present in the text itself, but as objects historians postulate as those that best make sense of the texts. This analysis of the beliefs historians ascribe to people coheres with several philosophical trends of recent years. Of particular interest to me is what I take to be its fit with my anthropological epistemology, according to which historical knowledge is justified not by reference to pure facts but in terms of a comparison between rival historical narratives – rival sets of postulates – in relation to appropriate epistemic criteria. More generally, it fits with the broad drift in the philosophy of mind from mentalism toward positions, such as analytic behaviourism, which analyse mental states as objects we postulate to make sense of action or to bridge a gap between input and output.

Postfoundational intentionalism not only coheres with certain philosophical trends, it also offers a distinctive view of the relationship of history and theory. On the one hand, postfoundational intentionalism suggests that historians can continue much as before: they still can go outside texts to invoke intentions and other historical objects that call a provisional halt to the process of interpretation. Equally though, it implies that they cannot neglect theory – sticking their head in the sand like an ostrich. Historians should acknowledge that their interpretations are saturated with their particular theories so that they need to offer some kind of defence of these theories. Nor should they seek to defend their theories by saying that these illuminate their material: such a defence cannot work

since their theories are already implicated in their construction of their material. Instead, historians are required by intellectual rigour and honesty to develop, or at least gesture toward, a philosophical analysis that defends the theories and concepts they deploy, and this is so no matter how natural or straightforward these theories and concepts might appear to them. If the implications of postfoundational intentionalism should prove at all fruitful, then much of the credit should, of course, go to Brown for raising such pertinent issues.

¹ J. Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. G. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 158. Although this textualism is now some thirty years old, and in parts of the human sciences a dominant orthodoxy, I am calling it the new textualism to distinguish it from the older view that the meaning of a text is inherent within it as an independent, idealized object.

² “A text . . . is no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces.” J. Derrida, “Living On: Borderlines”, in H. Bloom et. al., Deconstruction and Criticism (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), p. 84.

³ Originally I reserved the word “text” for the “text as a physical object” and used “work” to refer to “the meaning a text has for someone” since doing so helped me to highlight my view that texts do not have any meaning in themselves. M. Bevir, The Logic of the History of Ideas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 57-59.

⁴ “All those boundaries that form the running border of what used to be called a text, of what we once thought this word could identify, i.e. the supposed end and beginning of a work, the unity of a corpus, the title, the margins, the signatures, the referential realm outside the frame, and so forth [have been subject to] a sort of overrun that spoils all these boundaries and divisions and forces us to extend the accredited concept, the dominant notion of a ‘text’.” Derrida, “Living On: Borderlines”, p. 83.

⁵ Bevir, Logic, pp. 96-106.

⁶ For the relevant arguments, see especially Ibid., pp. 31-77.

⁷ Although I am eliding the differences between actual beliefs in cases of the unconscious and irrationality with those in cases of insincerity, I do not think unpacking the differences between the three cases would add to my response to Brown. For a fuller analysis of the specifics of each case see Ibid., pp. 265-308.

⁸ I have rewritten Brown's question (p. xxx above) to reflect my correction to her account of my distinction between expressed and actual beliefs.