**Dale Jacquette**
University of Bern

# COLLECTIVE REFERENTIAL INTENTIONALITY IN THE SEMANTICS OF DIALOGUE

**Abstract.** The concept of a dialogue is considered in general terms from the standpoint of its referential presuppositions. The semantics of dialogue implies that dialogue participants must generally have a collective intentionality of agreed-upon references that is minimally sufficient for them to be able to disagree about other things, and ideally for outstanding disagreements to become clearer at successive stages of the dialogue. These points are detailed and illustrated in a fictional dialogue, in which precisely these kinds of referential confusions impede progress in shared understanding. It is only through a continuous exchange of question and answer in this dialogue case study that the meanings of key terms and anaphorical references are disambiguated, and a relevantly complete collective intentionality of shared meaning between dialogue participants is achieved. The importance of a minimally shared referential semantics for the terms entering into reasoning and argument in dialogue contexts broadly construed cannot be over-estimated. Where to draw the line between referential agreement and disagreement within any chosen dialogue, as participants work toward better mutual understanding in clearing up referential incongruities, is sometimes among the dialogue's main points of dispute.

*Keywords*: ambiguity of meaning, collective intentionality, dialogue, equivocation, intentionality, meaning, semantics

## 1. Introduction: What is Dialogue?

*Dialogue* is literally two voices. Often we expect discussion to involve the distinct opinions and reasoning of at least two different persons with different points of view developing different arguments to support their positions against those with whom they are in dialectical opposition. The authors of such dialogues must enter into the participation of thinkers representing distinct points of view, much as the playwright must do in a work of drama or comedy intended for enactment on the stage.

As limiting cases, we must therefore consider dialogues written by single thinkers expressing multiple voices from within the resources of their

own imaginations. Philosophical dialogue is generally written by single authors, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*. Or, centuries earlier, in Anselm of Canterbury's didactic dialogues *De Casu Diaboli*, *De Veritate*, and *De Libertate Arbitrii*. Nor should we overlook especially Plato's more inventive nonhistorical philosophical dialogues, generally involving Socrates as dialectical hero or foil, along with those of Galileo, George Berkeley, David Hume, Nicolas Malebranche, among many others from antiquity to the present day.[1]

## 2. Two Voices Engaged Together in Reasoning

What is logically required if there is to be dialogue in the most general sense? We need minimally two voices, although not necessarily those of two different persons or dialogue participants. A single dialogue thinker need not be schizophrenic or exhibit multiple personality disorder. It is enough if an individual can project different philosophical positions *as though* in multi-person dialogue, to take on the argumentative stances of different thinkers at different times, in different characters, or on the basis of different assumptions. Philosophical dialogues can evolve as a result of a single thinker changing his or her mind over time, considering a proposition at one moment, and then criticizing it from as many different angles as occur sometime afterward at another.

There seems in contrast to be no requirement for dialogue to involve the articulation of logically, theoretically or practically opposed positions. In principle, a dialogue could unfold around the conversation of two voices that agree with each other and want to further develop their shared ideas. Interesting dialogues typically involve dispute, debate, argument, critique and counterargument, a little verbal swordplay. However, there are also many kinds of interesting and uninteresting genuine dialogues that meet the minimal expectations for a dialogue nonetheless, which should not be left out of account in trying to understand the concept of dialogue in its most general terms, and regardless of the interest we may attach to or withhold from any of its particular applications.

For two voices to engage in dialogue, as opposed to merely talking in turns in one another's presence, it appears logically necessary for the participants to understand at least some of each other's efforts at communication. This requirement is a matter of referential semantics, and, more specifically, where dialogue is concerned, of an ideal of collective intentionality. We can only talk with rather than past each other, and the characters in a dialogue

of one author's recollection or fictional creation can only be represented as talking with rather than past each other, if we as thinkers and speakers share a minimally sufficient referential intentionality relating thoughts expressed in the dialogue to the same referentially intended objects of dispute. Otherwise, there can be no agreement or disagreement about the meaning of the same concept, the truth value of a proposition, or the deductive properties of an inference.

## 3. Shared Referential Intentionalities in Dialogue

The fact that there is no simple formula for determining the exact minimum of shared referential intentionalities among genuine dialogue participants is a sign that the proper functioning and understanding of dialogue is not a purely logical matter, but involves an irreducible rhetorical dimension. That is to say that there are decisions to be made and interpretations to be chosen among possibilities of reading progress toward understanding or the reverse in the course of a dialogue, and especially in the case of philosophical dialogues.

Every successful dialogue proceeds in a different way toward securing the minimal ground for the possibility of both agreement on some things and potentiality for disagreement on others. A good dialogue is like an airplane descending from cloud bank to ground. It focuses agreement or dispute between multiple voices from a starting point of hazy cloud formation to the relatively more finely and distinctly delinated, generally conceptually more fundamental, agreements or disagreements underlying the surface disputes as they often appear already in a dialogue's opening moves.

The semantic basis for dialogue is among the outcomes of dialectical exchange occurring fictionally or reportorially within a dialogue format moving forward at least in the time it takes for an imaginary speaker uttering more than one syllable at a single instant of time. That minimal requirement should be met in every dialogue, even if the two voices offer only one syllable in reply to another syllable, and the dialogue is done. To think the content of a proposition $Fa$, that object $a$ has property $F$, is already to occupy a moment of time in thought and its expression. It is not pronounced like the musical note, but as saying *a is or has property F* or *F of a, F applies to a*, among other forms, the real or imaginary expression of which must occupy a moment of time, depending on whether the dialogue participants are real persons whose actual historical dialogical exchange is recorded or invented for a fictional dialogue. If it seems obvious that dialogue can only take place

in real or imaginary time, at least in the time that it takes someone to read or hear more than one syllable of a dialogue spoken, it is nonetheless worthwhile to emphasize the point, and doing so here should equally not disappoint.

What we are calling the rhetorical dimension of dialogue is based among other things on the temporal dimension of points of exchange in an ongoing discussion. Timing is as important for argument as it is for comedy. The fact that a dialogue begins when voice A introduces a certain argument, chooses one out of multiple arrangements of assumptions and conclusions in constructing or at least gesturing toward an argument, and a second voice B joins the interchange at a moment of real or imagined time afterward, makes rather a difference as when B first presents the same argument as in the original application, and A then later rejoins by offering the same argument as presented before in the first application considered. It can make all the difference in the world whether A precedes B or B precedes A in real or imagined time in presenting identically the same arguments in a dialogue, for example, as to whether or not A (or B) in offering the argument in question is begging the question against B (or A), or whether or not A (B) is arguing against a straw man. If B in the real or imaginary time of the dialogue has made an argument that A then criticizes, whatever the other merits or defects of A's argument against B's argument, A can hardly be accused of knocking down a straw man, for B provides the example of a position held by B against which A's criticism is directed.

A needs to know at least an essential part of what B means, and vice versa, in order for their distinct voices to be able to interact dialogically. Otherwise, we have emphasized, they will simply be talking in succession but argumentatively past one another. The first requirement of dialogue would therefore appear to be that the several voices involved in dialogue must be capable of understanding one another well enough for there to be sufficient shared referential agreements in order to make sense of the possibility of their disagreeing. The condition is meant to apply even when the dialogue participants do not actually disagree, but merely undertake to examine a jointly accepted agreed upon thesis, in order to explore its implications or applications, without ever running into assertoric or inferential conflict with one another in their extraordinary harmony, but rather build positively in dialogue toward a more completely shared collective intentionality. It remains fair to say, for all the importance of emphasizing the possibility of sociable ideally positively cooperative dialogue, most thinkers become involved in dialogue or are represented as such in fictional philosophical dialogues, in order to thrash out differences of opin-

ion. In the process, it often results in what are generally considered to be the most successful philosophical dialogues, not to exclude any other types, that disagreements are conceptually and inferentially refined, and clarity and a better sense of the strengths and weaknesses of one's own position and that of a dialectical opponent is attained. Such progress in a dialogue marks it as successful in this sense, even if it does not result in the resolution of any outstanding philosophical problem, and even if dialogue participants remain as alienated from one another's thinking as they were at the outset.

If I have lost my sanity, and believe that I hear a voice in my head that speaks a language I do not understand, then however it may terrify or amuse me, and whatever behavioral reactions it may occasion, I will not be able to enter into a genuine dialogue with the voice or its source in some other distant part of my personality. The voice cannot caution or instruct me, if I cannot connect with its language, nor can it try to dissuade me from acting, or create obstacles for the achievement of my wants. If any of this makes sense phenomenologically, then there will be two voices that are in some sense co-present, although not in dialogue with one another, provided that at least one side does not understand at all what the other is saying. We see in such extreme thought experiments what is needed for genuine dialogue, by reflecting on exactly how these kinds of cases fail to instantiate a discussion occurring in real or imaginary time, involving at least two different voices.[2]

## 4. Productive Oppositions Locked in Dialogue

If we believe that there are such things as dialogues, and that minimally two voices must be able to partially understand each other in order for a genuine dialogue to occur, then dialogue participants must at least share in a collective intentionality of reference to some objects and some of their properties. Only then are they free intelligibly to disagree about others.

Where there is dialogue, there is a modicum of understanding. There must be such, even if there is as yet no agreement or disagreement on whatever substantive issues may have occasioned the dispute. There must be such, even if the understanding is only partial and most of the dialogue itself focuses explicitly on potentially irresolvable points of significant referential and thetic or judgmental disagreement. The referential presuppositions that make such dialogue possible are sometimes subject to negotiation within an unfolding dispute.

If A and B are engaged in dialogue about whether or not it is the case that *p*, and if *p* abbreviates the proposition that object *a* has property *F*, then A and B must alike at least dispositionally understand what it means for *Fa* to be true, or to be false, to be confirmed by reason or experience, or to be judged incapable of being determined in truth value one way or the other. This condition in turn implies that A and B at least to a minimally sufficient extent must understand the referential meaning of object constant *a*, the concept of property *F*, and of the state of affairs in which *a* is *F*, *Fa*.

A dialogue is not abstract. We remind ourselves of the obvious when we reflect that it takes place over time. Like a dramatic or comic performance, a dialogue can involve twists and turns of argument, shiftings of burden of proof, appearance of succeeding or failing when the opposite is true, and many other possibilities. A dialogue in this sense is sometimes like a plot unfolding at the theatre. It can happen, especially in philosophically interesting dialogues, that dialogue participants change their positions, modify their understanding of the meanings or even meaningfulness of certain terms, as their dialectical interaction proceeds.

Although dialogue participants might in principle never reach agreement about the exact meaning let alone truth value, significance, utility, or the like, of *Fa* in a semantic theory's preferred normative sense, in the course of a good dialogue about such a predication, typically among many other things, ancillary or inferential, interlocutors should at least come to better understand what each believes the putative predication purports to mean. If the exact meaning of *Fa* remains the standout in a dialogue, about which participants are unable finally to agree, it can only do so against a backdrop of wide-ranging substantive agreements on the meanings of other terms, and even concerning the truth value of many propositions, without which it would not be possible to disagree and sustain meaningful disagreement concerning the semantic status of *Fa*.[3]

## 5. Equivocation and its Resolution in Dialogue

A sample dialogue of just the appropriate kind to illustrate the previous points concerning the need for a partial collective intentionality among dialogue participants is compactly presented in an unexpected source. It is offered as part of a booklength discussion of the formal semantic interpretation of musical scores by Kari Kurkela, in his published dissertation, *Note and Tone: A Semantic Analysis of Conventional Music Notation*. The dialogue features this exchange:

(1) *Mary*: What was that piece?
(2) *John*: It was the Moonlight Sonata.
(3) *M*: Did you like it?
(4) *J*: No, I didn't.
(5) *M*: You don't like the Moonlight Sonata?
(6) *J*: On the contrary, it is one of my favorite pieces.
(7) *M*: But you just said that we heard the Moonlight Sonata and that you didn't like it!
(8) *J*: I like the Moonlight Sonata but I didn't like what we heard...

It is obvious that John and Mary do not talk about the same object all the time. In (4), for instance, John refers to a single performance whereas in (6) he speaks of an abstraction...[4]

Dialogue presupposes a convergence of partial shared references among individual participants resulting in a collective intentionality. Exactly what these are typically are not prescribed, but unfold, evolve, are discovered and revealed in the process of interchange of ideas between dialogue participants. John and Mary must each and both mean the same thing by the 'Moonlight Sonata' in order for there to be meaningful communication of the sort required by two or more voices exchanging ideas in this application. Although, if pressed, they might be unable to offer specific insight into the ontology or identity conditions for individual works of music. Otherwise, even if only equivocally, they continue to use the same words from a purely lexical or syntactical point of view, they will not be able either to agree or disagree, thereby precluding their having a genuine dialogue.

The above snatch of conversation indicates the point very simply in a perfectly ordinary exemplary interchange. Such convergence need not take place immediately or throughout a dialogue at every moment in which there is discussion. It can be part of the purpose of a dialogue to clarify precisely these kinds of malocclusions between the conceptual frameworks of dialogue participants as their viewpoints are modified in and by virtue of engaging in dialogue. Effectively, distinct voices involved in dialogue can devote much of their energy to determining of one another precisely what each participant means by some key term or terms of interest. We need only think here of Berkeley's Enlightenment (1713) [3rd edition 1734] *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, where two fictional but philosophically representative speakers struggle over many pages to clarify the exact meaning of the words 'matter' and 'substratum', only to conclude philosophically that the words have and can have no intelligible perceptually validated meaning.[5]

What Kurkela says about the above dialogue between John and Mary is right enough, as far as it goes. Moreover, although Kurkela does not continue his analysis in this direction, the specific word that produces equivocation in the John-Mary dialogue is not 'Moonlight Sonata'. For while Kurkela correctly remarks that John refers to something different in dialogue lines (4) and (6), semantic interest reaches back also to line (2), where John first responds to Mary's dialogue-opening question. Dialogues, as an aside, can and often do, but are under no obligation to, begin with a question, classically exemplified by Meno's impudent first line in Plato's classic dialogue, the *Meno*.[6] Since Mary begins Kurkela's dialogue, if there is to be dialogue at all, then John as the second voice must respond to Mary's question in one way or another; else they have not yet begun an actual intercommunication of voices. Hence, to underscore the obvious once again, John must understand at least part of what Mary says, in the sense of sharing a collective referential intentionality by designating at least some of the same objects or concepts in each moment of their exchange.

Rather, the equivocation on which the quickly resolved narrative arc of the dialogue turns is the species or specimen distinction equally conveyed by the same equivocal word 'piece'. What does Mary mean in her opening question when she asks John 'What was that piece?' John, if he is to answer the question and take part in dialogue with Mary, must try to understand what she means by 'that piece'. He manifestly decides that she most likely wants to know what musical work or composition had just been performed. Although it appears that Mary and John may have both attended the same musical performance, context in the case of an actual dialogue with real life dimension might further reveal that Mary was not in a position to know what was on the program for the performance, so that John reasonably assumed she wanted to know what *piece*, in the sense of musical composition, he or they had recently heard performed. It might have been Mozart, for all that John expected Mary to know, it might have been Stravinsky, rather than Beethoven, or something other than that particular work by Beethoven.

## 6. Convergence and Divergence of Referential Meaning in Dialogue

Mary's next question causes John to step away from his original interpretation of her instigating question. Now the equivocal word to consider is 'it', when Mary asks, 'Did you like it?' The connecting reference is that of anaphor, often ambiguous, as in the old vaudeville joke, in which one

of two workmen pressing a nail against a board, says, When I nod my head, hit it with the hammer. It could be the composition or an occasion of its performance that is intended by Mary's 'it'. Since Mary in line (3) asks, "Did" (instead of "Do") you like it?, John is cued toward a specific event in the past, the performance of the composition that they both apparently attended, rather than his appreciation for the composition in more general terms.

If Mary wanted to know about John's general sense of enjoyment for Beethoven's composition, rather than a particular performance of the piece, then most likely she would not have directed John to something specific, to the 'it', occurring in the past tense. Otherwise, if she was inquiring about a possible change in John's attitude over time toward the composition, she might have more naturally have asked, 'Did you *ever* like it?' To ask simply, 'Did you like it?', in a dialogue context concerning a musical performance, without further specification, carries a strong presumption of conversational implicature establishing the referent of 'it' as a particular performance rather than the composition generally or in the abstract. Especially is this true if context reveals that Mary may have attended such a concert performance recently with John or anyway knows that John did. We speak metaphorically of great works of art as being timeless, and something of this sense carries over to a composition, such as the Moonlight Sonata, considered independently of its performances. That this is not Mary's intention, the back-reference of her temporally backward-directed anaphoric 'it', is a prime semantic consideration clarified only through John and Mary's further dialectical interchange.

Now John understands that Mary wants to know his opinion of the particular performance he recently attended. He did not like it, and says so without further qualification in (4). Mary in (5) may assume that if you like a composition you enjoy most or even all performances of it. Or she may not be familiar with John's musical tastes or knowledge of late classical early romantic music. Her main burden is that she must now deal with the further semantic consequences of the ambiguity of 'it', introduced by her own contribution (3), and a need to backtrack through the potential referential misunderstandings in their previous exchange. She must now consider that when John says he did not like 'it', thanks to her own lack of clarity in posing her previous two questions, he may have meant, for all she knows, in any of his answers, either the composition or its recent performance. Mary fully resolves the ambiguity already in line (5), although she does not seem to know it. John reinforces in (6) his understanding in (2) of what Mary ought to have meant by 'piece'. There are musical pieces, which is to say

compositions, and there are performances of those pieces. Logically, one might admire a piece but loathe its performance, although presumably one could not absolutely loathe each and all of its performances, including those in one's own imagination, hearing the composition played virtually as one prefers and thinks it should be performed.[7]

Mary in (7) expresses her outraged sense of inconsistency at the conjunction of John's perfectly reasonable answers, but John in (8) reminds her of the aforesaid distinction. The key difference is that between musical compositions considered, as Kurkela says, in the abstract, as opposed to particular performances. John undoubtedly means colloquially to explain that he has heard such musically superior performances of the Moonlight Sonata, that the recent performance in comparison was aesthetically distinctly unrewarding. He might say that they failed to properly deliver the score, that it was a travesty of Beethoven to have his music so under-practiced and badly performed and conducted by such unaccomplished incompetent musicians, if that is his conclusion. That the performers were not putting enough passion into the performance. Or the like. Nor were the tickets for the concert given away for free, John may continue to reflect.

On the whole, John is dissatisfied with the particular *performance event*. Although, as he might put it upon further reflection or dialectical dialogical interrogation, he may again like the composition itself as one of his favorite *pieces*. A performance of a piece is not the piece itself in the usual musical jargon, and in the most natural minimal implied cultural ontology of musical entities. The distinction remains valid even in avant music, while in other arts there is talk in specific media of the concept of a 'performance piece'. By this is meant a piece that is intended to be performed, however, rather than both a performance *and* a piece to be performed, even when the performance is a performance of the performance piece.

Cross-terminologies in the performance world might therefore be at the root of Mary's use of the word 'piece' in proposition (1). It is this slippage of collective referential intentionality that seems to set poor John off in the wrong direction, as he tries conversationally to respond to Mary's original question. The only possibility for John to have headed off further ambiguity at this early point in the dialogue would have been to respond pedantically in a variant of (2), (2*) *John*: It was a performance of the Moonlight Sonata. Or more pedantically still: (2**) *John*: It was either the composition Moonlight Sonata or a particular performance of the composition Moonlight Sonata. This is not how we want John to talk in ordinary after-concert conversation with Mary. The ambiguities of colloquial exchange just as Kurkela presents them are philosophically more instructive.

## 7. Generalizing Morals in Kurkela's Dialogue

The dialogue fragment from Kurkela is not chosen at random. It represents minimally necessary and sufficient requirements for genuine dialogue in multi-vocal performances. The proposal is that genuine dialogue requires speakers at some point to arrive at least at a shared understanding, or mutually recognized collective referential intentionality.

Progress toward shared meanings can often take the form of resolving an initial inhibiting referential equivocation, as the Kurkela dialogue illustrates, in a productive mutually recognized collective referential intentionality that is minimally necessary and sufficient in the context of a multi-vocal performance, even for participants to agree or disagree about other propositions included in the dialogue. Here, the larger target concerns aesthetic responses to Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, considered in the abstract as a musical composition. John and Mary, who certainly get around in the logical and philosophical literature, work toward untangling what is at first only ambiguously represented as the object referred to by Mary's dialogue initiating question, either by Beethoven's score and its most accomplished performances, which John likes, or, and as opposed to that of, a recently experienced particular performance, which, once their talk comes to focus on this referential agreement, we eventually come to understand that John definitely did not like.

The aspect of dialogue emphasized by the presumably fictional exchange from Kurkela is that it is necessary and sufficient for a genuine dialogue to occur in the course of a multi-vocal performance, as opposed to persons taking turns talking past each other in real, imaginary, or virtual presence. All that is needed for genuine dialogue is for speakers explicitly involved in dialogue or implicitly in their ongoing verbal exchange to acknowledge a quantum of mutually recognized collective referential intentionality on the basis of which they can try to work toward further agreement or better clarification of irresolvable disagreements. At some point or other in a genuine dialogue, they must be talking to each other about some of the same things. The general point is obvious, which is not to say it is always theoretically respected. The philosophical implication for argumentation theory is that what is minimally essential to dialogue is semantically deeper than the propositional level of entire assumptions and conclusions, reaching down to the referential meanings of individual words. Much the same result is reached by arguing that if assumptions are shared, then so are the meanings of some of the terms agreed-upon propositions contain. The thesis need not be denied, but neither need it be relied on as the only or even the best route

toward establishing the minimally necessary and sufficient conditions for dialogue among all multi-vocal performances. It remains worth emphasizing that the theory of argumentation has its own immediately dialogue-related justification for the conclusion independently of such Frege-inspired but still controversial semantic principles as semantic compositionality. Why should we make such commitments in understanding the concept of dialogue, if there is no need? The vital insight, as essential as it is important to keep in view in argumentation theory, can be intuitively supported by reflecting directly on the minimal requirements, necessary and sufficient conditions, for dialogue. Additionally, the selection from Kurkela depicts discussants who typify the fact that there need be no preset starting place for dialogue in any mutually recognized referential agreement, as long as there is the potential of attaining it. Progress toward the goal is successfully made with at least some mutually recognized collective referential intentionality of shared referential meanings before the dialogue closes.

The dialogue, brief as it is, when we have mined it for main points of interest, reveals essential facts about the *concept* of dialogue, how it might be appropriately analyzed, and what is minimally required for a genuine dialogue among multi-vocal performances that also include non-dialogues. At a philosophical level, the sample musical discussion between John and Mary makes it possible with little or no further equivocation or related semantic clutter to identify and reinforce in a *found application.* This means that it is not an application that has not been cooked up as a thought experiment to illustrate the present thesis concerning the nature of dialogue, but appears in print for entirely different reasons. There in its innocence we discover the minimally necessary and sufficient conditions for genuine dialogue among real historical and fictional multi-verbal performances, in the effort of two voices to come to mutual understanding of relevant referential meanings. Genuine dialogue, as opposed to non-dialogue multi-vocal performances, verbal performances involving two or more speakers, who never touch base on any referential meanings, need not entail any *thetic* disagreement, but must have the potential to work toward a mutually recognized mutually recognized *collective referential intentionality* of speaker-shared referential meanings.

The point once made is unsurprising, for some perhaps even disappointing. It is a tautology, after all, if the situation is correctly understood. We say only that a genuine dialogue minimally requires or presupposes as necessary and sufficient conditions the realized potential at some stage of a multi-vocal performance for participant voices to achieve a mutually recognized collective referential intentionality of shared referential meanings.

The conclusion nevertheless has philosophically significant implications. It is markedly different than the Locke-Whately-Johnstone thesis that all argument involves the nonabusive *ad hominem*. John Locke, Richard Whately, and Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., all developed more or less in parallel tracks the suggestion that in order for there to be argument between different thinkers, they must agree upon the truth of at least some assumptions.[8] Here the point goes semantically deeper, in a way, but can be seen as the basis of an *ad hominem* rhetorical interpretation extended to include all genuine argument. There can be no *ad hominem* sharing of assumptions, without the mutually recognized collective referential intentionality of dialogue participants, and especially among those arguing with or against others, concerning the referential meanings of individual terms contained within the expression of agreed-upon assumptions, supposing there to be some, even where the corresponding conclusions of the arguments in question sharply disagree.

What is essential to genuine dialogue is not necessarily agreement on any shared *assumptions*, but only on the *recognition of shared referential meanings* of at least some words. Such words need not even belong to any explicit or background assumptions that genuine dialogue participants may happen to share or about which they may happen to disagree.

## 8. Conclusion: Disagreement Pendant on Mutual Understanding and Collective Referential Intentionality in Argument

The differences between John and Mary in their understanding of the intended references of special terms in their exchange, centering on the exact references of 'piece' and 'it' as the dialogue takes shape in imaginary time, should not be over-emphasized at the expense of their substantial agreements. John and Mary must at least implicitly believe themselves collectively to intend the same thing by 'Moonlight Sonata', the occasion on which the music was performed, and the grammar of English in this example, along with words about which John and Mary seem to be in perfect harmony, such as 'what', 'was', 'that', 'the', 'did', 'you', 'like', 'didn't', 'don't', 'on the contrary', 'is one of my favorite pieces', 'but', 'just said that we heard', and all the components thereof in all their grammatical combinatorics.

Although the word is not used by Kurkela, there seems also to be a significant agreed-upon shared reference, with no further clarification required, to whatever it is supposed to be that 'we [John and Mary] heard'. Were it not for convergence of collective intentionality on the same musical event,

John would have no easy way to resolve the ambiguity explicitly as he does in (8), between a musical composition, on the one hand, and, on the other, a particular musical event of its performance. It is the latter which they both understand and agree they 'heard', and the composition rather than the performance as what John assumes Mary wants to know by asking about the identity of 'that piece' in her opening (1). At least there seems to be no disagreement or ambiguity in the John-Mary dialogue over the performance event in question. It is only against such a backdrop of understanding that John and Mary can enter into referential confusion over other standout words, leaving the dialogue opening for ambiguity concerning what John thinks of 'that piece'. This phrase, for Mary, can apparently mean either the composer's musical composition or a musical group's performance of the same work on a particular occasion.

We learn a variety of interesting semantic requirements of dialogue from Kurkela's John-Mary conversation. Two voices exchanging different points of view or trying to resolve a question that one or more dialogue participant wants to answer, and working toward clarification of concepts or a solution to a problem. As often occurs in dialogue, even with oneself. Dialogue tolerates and even thrives essentially on a certain level of intentional disalignment between participants. They need not agree on absolutely everything, in order to understand well enough of one another the ways in which they may not agree, even if it is only in their usage of terms like 'piece', 'Moonlight Sonata', and in principle any other words, including what one of them previously anaphorically meant by 'it'. Whether there is a definite proportion of referential understanding or collective intentionality to referential misunderstanding or breakdown of collective intentionality, a limit of tolerance exists, as to how much misunderstanding a genuine dialogue can support against a backdrop of understanding and collectively agreed-upon intentionality, especially in referential convergences, is not formulaic but a matter of rhetorical judgment that is often worked out only in the ongoing course of the dialogue itself. These boundaries are not usually trivial to determine, and, in some interesting cases, they may require full imaginative participation in the dialogue exchange in order to identify exactly where disagreement occurs and how it originates, before dialogue participants can see their way clear to resolving their disagreement, if at all, once there is agreement at least as to major conflicting points in contention. Actual dialogue can extend this process far beyond the John and Mary variations, and in some instances may never actually be resolved.[9]

The optimistic conjecture, for those with faith or a track record of reliable positive experience in using dialectical methods, is that, provided there

is *any* basis for understanding, *any* shared grasp of reference or collective intentionality between two or more voices on which to build, all ambiguities can eventually be clarified in something like the way that has been described. Given enough time, physical endurance and good will on the part of dialogue participants, this level of clarity should always be within the grasp of open-minded argument between two or more voices, however disparate their respective dialectical starting places. The clarification for one another's benefit of two or more thinkers engaged in dialogue is attainable, from this perspective, even if, in contrast, agreement on the truth values of the ultimately contested propositions or application of concepts on which further disagreement centers, the differences that provide the explicit subject matter of dispute among dialogue interlocutors, is never achieved by opposing dialogue participants, and the most interesting disputes themselves are never dialectically resolved.[10]

### N O T E S

[1] An eloquent appeal for the importance of dialogue by a non-philosopher is offered by theoretical physicist Bohm (2004).

[2] For a counter-Aristotelian later Renaissance perspective on the logic of dialectical discourse, see Ong (2005) [1958].

[3] Here I partly follow Garrod and Anderson (1987). Another valuable resource is Reyle (1993).

[4] Kurkela (1986), pp. 136–137.

[5] I emphasize this aspect of the philosophical uses of dialogue format in my recent critical edition of Berkeley, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (2013). I promote the use of dialogue format for the same reasons in the seven completed volumes of my Rowman & Littlefield series-edited, New Dialogues in Philosophy. The series includes my own *Dialogues* *on* *the* *Ethics* *of* *Capital* *Punishment* (Jacquette, 2009), alongside book-length dialogues by six other authors. As further indication of my interest in this genre, I have written article-length dialogues on a variety of topics, including Gödel sentence applications of the Turing Test in philosophy of mind (1993a), Zeno of Elea's paradox of Achilles and the tortoise in Jacquette (1993b), and the appeal and limits of idealism in metaphysics, Jacquette (2012). There is a growing literature written in and about philosophical dialogues, which I consider to be a healthy sign of interest in the format of two or more voices as an invaluable mode of conceptual inquiry. I offer further reflections on the significance of argument and sound reasoning in Jacquette (2013a). See also Jacquette (2013b) for a review of Finocchiaro's recent study of meta-argumentation.

[6] Plato, *Meno* 70a1–3: 'Can you tell me, Socrates, can virtue be taught? Or is it not teachable but the result of practice, or is it neither of these, but men possess it by nature or in some other way?' (Grube, 1981, p. 59). Meno's cheek in raising such a question would not have been lost on Plato's original readers, who would have known what a scoundrel Meno was from town gossip to the pages of Xenophon's *Anabasis*.

[7] The classic source is arguably Grice (1969). See also, from this same prolific era, Searle (1969), especially Chapter 2, 'Expressions, meanings and speech acts', pp. 22–53. Minsky (1969).

### R E F E R E N C E S

Asher, N. & Lascarides, A. (2005). *Logics of Conversation*, Studies in Natural Language Processing series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Berkeley, G. (2013 [1734]). *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*. Edited by Dale Jacquette. Toronto: Broadview Press.

Bohm, D. (2004). *On Dialogue* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Garrod, S. & Anderson, A. (1987). Saying What You Mean in Dialogue: A Study in Conceptual and Semantic Coordination. *Cognition*, 27, 181–218.

Grice, H.P. (1969). Utterer's Meaning and Intentions'. *The Philosophical Review*, 68, 147–177.

Jacquette, D. (1993a). A Turing Test Conversation. *Philosophy*, 68, 231–233.

Jacquette, D. (1993b). A Dialogue on Zeno's Paradox of Achilles and the Tortoise'. *Argumentation*, 7, 273–290.

Jacquette, D. (2009). *Dialogues on the Ethics of Capital Punishment*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Jacquette, D. (2012). A Dialogue on Metaphysics. *Philosophy Now*, 92, 33.

Jacquette, D. (2013a). Socrates on the Moral Mischief of Misology. *Argumentation*, 27. On-Line First at Springer DOI 10.1007/s10503-013-9298-7, and forthcoming in print.

Jacquette, D. (2013b). Review of Maurice A. Finocchiaro, *Meta-Argumentation: An Approach to Logic and Argumentation Theory. Argumentation*, 27. On-Line First at Springer DOI 10.1007/s10503-013-9301-3, and forthcoming in print.

Johnstone, H. W., Jr. (1952). Philosophy and *Argumentum Ad Hominem. The Journal of Philosophy*, 49, 489–498.

Johnstone, H. W., Jr. (1954). Some Aspects of Philosophical Disagreement. *Dialectica*, 8, 245–257.

Johnstone, H. W., Jr. (1996). Locke and Whately on the *Argumentum ad Hominem. Argumentation*, 10, 89–97.

Kurkela, K. (1986). *Note and Tone: A Semantic Analysis of Conventional Music Notation*. Helsinki: Suomen Musiikkitieteellinen Seura Musikvetenskapliga Sällskapet I Finland.

Minsky, M. (1969). *Semantic Information Processing.* Cambridge: The MIT (Bradford Books) Press.

Ong, W. J. (2005 [1958]). *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Plato (1981). *Meno.* Translation in G.M.A. Grube, Plato, *Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo.* Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

Redmond, J. & Fontaine, M. (2011). *How to Play Dialogues: An Introduction to Dialogical Logic.* London: College Publications.

Reyle, U. (1993). Dealing With Ambiguities of Underspecification: Construction, Interpretation and Deduction. *Journal of Semantics*, 10, 123–179.

Rueckert, H. (2011). *Dialogues as a Dynamic Framework for Logic.* London: College Publications.

Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Walton, D. N. & Krabbe, E. C. W. (1995). *Commitment in Dialogue: Basic Concepts of Interpersonal Reasoning.* Albany: State University of New York (SUNY) Press.