THE MEANINGS OF A TEXT

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Is THE meaning of a text whatever the author intended the text to mean? Or can a text have meanings that are quite different from anything intended by the author? I believe that this important dispute in the theory of interpretation has recently taken a new turn in a direction which radically changes the terms of the dispute and which should lead us to shift the discussion to a new and more profound level. This is what I will try to show in this paper.

The dispute about 'the meaning of a text' arises because many texts can be interpreted in several different (and sometimes mutually incompatible) ways. Should Shakespeare's *Hamlet* be understood as a play about the relation between thought and action, as a representation of the Oedipus Complex, or as an Elizabethan revenge tragedy? This type of question is often put by using the term 'meaning': 'What is the meaning of *Hamlet*?' The dispute about meaning is *not*, ultimately, a dispute about the number of meanings that a text can have; both sides to the dispute would agree that a text can have more than one meaning. (Those who identify meaning with authorial intention would agree that the author could have had more than one intention and hence that the text could have several meanings.) Instead, the dispute is about the role of the author's intention: is the meaning of a text limited to whatever the author intended? Thus, this question of the role of authorial intention is independent of the question whether there can be several equally valid interpretations of a text.

On what basis might one argue that the meaning of a text is determined by the author's intention? E. D. Hirsch's arguments for this position are widely known, and I have discussed them at length elsewhere.[1] Here I want to focus on a new and important type of argument which was first presented to me by Professor Gerald Graff of Northwestern University in private correspondence. Another version of this type of argument has recently been published by Professor William E. Tolhurst. I will be concerned with the general form of argument of which the Graff argument and the Tolhurst argument are specific instances. This general form of argument is intended to support the view that authorial intention is of primary importance in interpretation.

In the version presented by Graff, this argument rests on a distinction between possible meanings and actual meanings. A set of words often has

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more than one possible meaning. When these words are used by some speaker or author they have actual meaning. The practices, conventions, and rules of language determine the possible meanings of those words. The speaker or author then takes advantage of these conventions and rules to say something by using those words. Thus, for example, a word like 'bark' has a number of possible meanings. It could refer to the sound made by a dog, or to the outer covering of a tree. Which of these meanings is its actual meaning when used on a given occasion is wholly determined by what the speaker is trying to say on that occasion. To put this in a slightly different way, the possible meanings of the words limit what the speaker can say by using those words. Within this range of possible meanings, the speaker's intention determines what he does say, that is, determines the actual meaning of what he says. After all, when faced with a set of words which could mean several different things, how can we know what they in fact do mean except by finding out what the speaker or author meant to say? Now, the important point about a text is that it is the result of the author's using words to say something. Texts simply do not exist without authors. Since texts are *uses* of words by authors, the meanings of texts are determined by the intentions of their authors, just as the meanings of all uses of words are determined by the intentions of their users.

In the version presented by Tolhurst, this argument rests on a distinction between utterance and word sequence. Tolhurst distinguishes three types of meanings from one another: utterer's meaning, utterance meaning, and word sequence meaning.[2] Utterer's meaning is identical with authorial intention; it is what the speaker or author means to say. Word sequence meaning is the meaning or meanings of the set of words taken by themselves apart from any actual use of those words (what Graff calls the 'possible meanings' of the words). Utterance meaning is the meaning of that set of words as *used* by a certain speaker or author on a certain occasion (and which Graff calls the 'actual meaning').

Although their arguments are thus based on the same distinction—the distinction between utterance or uses of words and word sequence or the words themselves apart from use—Graff and Tolhurst seem to arrive at different conclusions. Graff conceives of the author as choosing one (or more) of the many possible meanings that a word sequence has and then actualizing that meaning by uttering or writing those words with that intention in mind. Thus, for Graff, the author's intention determines the meaning of the utterance. Tolhurst takes this to be E. D. Hirsch's theory and argues against it: 'It is an inescapable fact that an author or speaker can fail to write or say what he means, and this is impossible on Hirsch's theory.'[3] 'People sometimes fail to say what they mean: malapropisms and slips of the tongue are a part of everyone's linguistic experience. Thus utterer's meaning is not always utterance meaning.'[4] Because a person can fail to say what he or she

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means, the author's intention does not determine the meaning of the text. This seems to argue against Graff's move from the claim that the author actualizes a possible meaning to the conclusion that therefore authorial intention determines the meaning of the text.

But I think that even if this is a legitimate objection to Hirsch's view, it is not a legitimate objection to Graff's version of the authorial intention theory. A speaker or author will fail to say what he or she means when the word sequence does not have the author's meaning as one of its possible meanings. (A simple example is using the word sequence 'The moon is blue' in an attempt to say 'The redcoats are coming'.) But Graff would not hold that authorial intention determines the meaning of the utterance no matter what that intention is. Instead, authorial intention determines the meaning of the utterance only when the author's meaning is one of the possible meanings of the text. The author cannot endow the text with a meaning which that text cannot have. Authorial intention reigns supreme only within the range of possible meanings of the word sequence. This allows authors to fail to say what they mean when they use words which do not have the author's meaning as one of their possible meanings and thus accommodates Tolhurst's criticism.

Tolhurst's own theory is a variant of the authorial intention theory. After distinguishing between the three kinds of meaning, he shows that different authors can make use of the very same word sequence to say two different things and then recommends that we regard a text as an utterance rather than as a word sequence. What, then, is the relation between authorial intention and utterance meaning? We have already seen that authorial intention does not automatically determine utterance meaning because people can fail to say what they mean. Here is Tolhurst's answer: '. . . utterance meaning is best understood as the intention which a member of the intended audience would be most justified in attributing to the author based on the knowledge and attitudes which he possesses in virtue of being a member of the intended audience.'[5]

I hope that it is clear that Graff's position and Tolhurst's position are alike in being founded on a distinction between two notions of 'the text'. They both talk not merely about words but the *uses* of words by authors and speakers. Let us henceforth use Tolhurst's convenient names for this distinction: 'utterance' and 'word sequence'. An utterance is the use of a word sequence to say something. If two authors use the same word sequence, they make different utterances. So this model—which we might for convenience call 'the Utterance Model'—goes beyond those theories which distinguish *types* of meaning from one another. The Utterance Model distinguishes two *carriers* of meaning from one another. Perhaps this can be made clear in the following way. In an essay also concerned with the question of authorial intention, Quentin Skinner distinguishes three types of

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meaning: (1) what the words mean; (2) what the work means to this reader or that audience; (3) what the author means.[6] Even with these distinctions in hand, we can still ask questions about *what it is* that has each of these types of meaning. The Utterance Model focuses on this question by distinguishing two senses of the expression 'the text'. This distinction constitutes the first part of what I am calling 'the Utterance Model'. The second part of this model consists of the view that authorial intention is of great importance in arriving at a proper interpretation of a text. This view is that interpreters ought to focus their efforts on uses of word sequences, or utterances, and that either the author's intention plays a large role in determining the meaning of an utterance (Graff) or that the meaning of an utterance is the authorial intention which the intended audience is best justified in attributing to the text (Tolhurst). To put it differently, the Utterance Model: (i) isolates utterances by distinguishing them from word sequences; (ii) holds that interpreters should apply their interpretative efforts to utterances; (iii) points out that the meaning of an utterance is closely linked with authorial intention; and (iv) concludes that interpreters must aim at determining authorial intention.

Having described the Utterance Model, I now wish to examine its implications. The picture that this model proposes is this: (1) the word sequence has many possible meanings; (2) the author chooses among these meanings the one (or several) meanings which he or she wishes to convey to the audience. The picture, thus, is one of a pre-existing word sequence with its associated pre-existing range of meanings from which the author chooses. Tolhurst sponsors this picture by invoking a Wittgenstein-like analogy between words and tools:

> A tool, e.g., a hammer, has certain properties which fit it to perform certain tasks. In saying what it is to be one tool rather than another, we consider these properties and the sorts of purposes which they enable the object to fulfil. So too, a word sequence possesses certain properties, its meaning or meanings, which enable it to be used to perform certain tasks. Just as we can use a hammer to perform any one of a number of tasks, so too we may be able to use a given word sequence to make a number of different utterances. In specifying what a hammer is being used for on a particular occasion, we are doing something very like what we do in specifying utterance meaning.[7]

This analogy leads us to believe that a text, like a hammer, is an already formed or existing entity ready to be put to use. Similarly, Graff endorses this type of picture when he talks about a pre-existing range of possible meanings with the author choosing one or several to actualize.

I believe that this picture is seriously misleading because it covers up and leads us to ignore a fundamentally important fact, namely that *the author creates the word sequence as well as the utterance*. A tool exists prior to its use; a tool is already formed and waiting to serve its function. But this is not true of a word sequence. The act of writing is simultaneously the creation of

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a word sequence and the creation of an utterance. It is not as if the author had word sequences already written down from which he chooses the one which he will utter. There is no master file of word sequences which authors consult. A word sequence is the author's creation.[8] Moreover, the meanings of a word sequence are objective meanings and are independent of the author's intentions, since, as Graff and Tolhurst themselves insist, the meanings of a word sequence considered solely as a word sequence are determined by public rules and linguistic conventions.

The next point that I want to make about word sequences is this. The Utterance Model wishes to identify the text with an utterance. To establish the idea of an utterance, this model must distinguish utterances from something else. The 'something else' turns out to be word sequences. *Thus, in establishing the idea of an utterance whose meaning does depend on the author's intention, the Utterance Model also establishes the idea of a created text, namely the word sequence, whose meanings definitely do not depend on the author's intention.*

The text as word sequence is thus available as something which can be interpreted. Graff and Tolhurst argue that we should instead confine our interpretative activity to utterances. Now, it is one thing to say that utterances ought to be interpreted (a claim with which I wholly agree) and quite a different thing to say (as I believe Graff and Tolhurst do) that *only* utterances ought to be interpreted. Since word sequences are as well established as utterances, why should we not interpret them too?

One of the major arguments used by Graff and Tolhurst to direct interpretative activities away from word sequences and towards utterances has already been mentioned, namely that words (like 'bark') and word sequences are often inherently ambiguous and that therefore we cannot tell what they mean apart from authorial intention. But now that we have distinguished between utterance and word sequence, this argument becomes irrelevant. For the whole idea of zeroing in on one meaning or on a subset of meanings out of a range of possible meanings is relevant only to utterances and makes no sense in connection with word sequences. In the case of a word sequence, no one of its meanings has any kind of privileged position over any other of its meanings; no subset of its meanings has a privileged position over any other subset. Therefore it is not reasonable to apply this 'ambiguity' argument to word sequences by complaining that one cannot determine which meaning or meanings are 'the meaning' of the word sequence. For in the case of a word sequence there *cannot* be a privileged meaning. Let me put this in a slightly different way. The Utterance Model rests on the fundamental assumption that the aim of interpretation is to determine 'the' meaning of the text and that this meaning (or these meanings) must be singled out from among the many possible meanings of the text. It is then held that this singling out of 'the' meaning can only be done by aiming at authorial intention. Because there is manifestly no such thing as 'the' meaning

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of a word sequence—a privileged meaning which can be singled out from the word sequence's many possible meanings—the Utterance Model would have interpreters turn away from word sequences and focus their attentions on utterances. Now this view, which rests on the assumption that interpretation should consist in the singling out of meaning, takes an arbitrary and narrow view of the possibilities of interpretation. If instead we view interpretation as 'the elucidation of meaning' we can see that interpretation can focus on word sequence too. In the case of word sequence the appropriate interpretative activity is to lay out the range of meanings possessed by the word sequence. All the parties to the dispute, including Graff and Tolhurst, agree that the possible meanings of a word sequence are objective since they are determined by such objective factors as linguistic rules and public conventions. Interpretation of a word sequence simply consists of exhibiting these objective meanings—the full range of these meanings rather than attempting to single out some from others as privileged in the sense of being 'the' meaning of the word sequence. We no longer have a unitary concept of 'the text' to which a unitary concept of interpretation is appropriate. *Instead, by distinguishing between utterance and word sequence, we now have two different concepts of the text, to which two different concepts of interpretation are appropriate.* It is easy to condemn interpretation of word sequences by applying to them an inappropriate interpretative aim. To do this is to ignore a completely appropriate (and, as I will argue in a moment, valuable) activity that can take place with respect to word sequences. Interpretation is the elucidation of meaning. For utterances this consists in determining the author's meaning; for word sequences this consists in laying out ranges of meanings. Consequently to argue that one should concentrate interpretative efforts on utterances because word sequences are inherently ambiguous is to apply to word sequences an entirely inappropriate conception of interpretation. It follows from this that authorial intention does not always determine meaning and should not always guide interpretative activity. For it should not and cannot guide the interpretation of word sequences.

At this point it may be objected that even this notion of word sequence meaning is tied to authorial intention, and hence I cannot escape being concerned with authorial intention by focusing on word sequence interpretation. The argument supporting this objection would run as follows: the only sense that we can give to the notion of a word sequence meaning is that it is something which an author *could* use those words to mean. This is indeed why someone (such as Graff) might speak of word sequence meanings as '*possible* meanings', the word 'could' introducing the notion of possibility. I want to reply to this objection by pointing out an ambiguity. Suppose that we accept the claim that a word sequence meaning should be understood in this way, thus linking the *concept* of a word sequence meaning to the

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concept of authorial intention. Nevertheless, it does not follow from this that we can determine a word sequence meaning only by investigating some actual author's intention. To find out what meaning a word sequence could have, what use an author could make of the word sequence, requires thinking about what authors *could* mean but *not* what they *do* mean. Thus, the recommendation that we find out what a text does mean by finding out what a particular author does mean still cannot apply to word sequence meaning. Instead, with word sequences, we find out what the text *does* mean by finding out what an author *could* mean. And this is very different from what the authorial intention theory urges, namely that interpreters must determine the actual meanings of actual authors.

This latest point gives us the materials to reply to yet another objection. This new objection shifts from the question of what interpretation must be for word sequences to the question of whether such interpretation is worth while. Here is the objection: the meanings of word sequences are possible meanings, as Graff says; hence, if we were to spend time interpreting word sequences we would be spending our time on possibilities, not actualities. But actualities are more important and more interesting than possibilities. After all, we are (rightly) more interested in finding out the properties of the actual world than in speculating about the properties of one or another possible world; therefore the interpretation of word sequences is not worth while because we can better spend that interpretative time and energy on the interpretation of actual utterances. My reply is that in investigating the meanings of word sequences we are investigating the *actual* world in a certain respect. It is true that word sequence meanings represent possible uses of those sequences. But those possible uses are actual capacities and hence *actual properties* of those word sequences. Just as it is an actual property of a screwdriver that it can be used to perform a certain function, so too it is an actual property of a word sequence that it can be used to mean this or that. We should not allow ourselves to become confused by the notion of possibility here. Possible meanings are actual properties, not possible properties, of a word sequence.

My basic point is that, as a result of the distinction between utterance and word sequence, we now have two types of 'texts'. Therefore interpreters could aim at interpreting one or the other or both of these types of texts. And this raises the question: Is it 'correct' to interpret one type and ignore the other? The Utterance Model claims that interpreters ought to work with utterances rather than word sequences. It must be emphasized that here we are in the domain of recommendations. Graff and Tolhurst do not give arguments to show that their views are correct descriptions of interpretative practice. They do not, for example, attempt to give statistical evidence resulting from surveys of what interpreters actually do. Instead they give arguments designed to show that the interpreter should work with utterances

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and therefore should pay attention to authorial intention—recommendations rather than descriptions. I have tried to show that their major argument—namely that one cannot determine what the text means without referring to authorial intention—is not relevant to the type of texts which are called 'word sequences'. For this reason it seems to me that the proper and correct answer which the positions taken by Graff and Tolhurst should give to the question 'In interpreting, should we aim at authorial intention?' is not their unqualified 'Yes', but instead this: 'If you are interpreting an utterance, then you must aim at authorial intention; if you are interpreting a word sequence, then you should ignore authorial intention'. This answer follows from their own distinction between utterance and word sequence.

Of course, someone might now say again that it is not worth while to attempt to interpret word sequences, that nothing of value can be obtained in this way, and that interpretative time and energy should instead be focused on the interpretation of utterances. This is the new ground on which we must now argue. This is the new issue to which the distinction between utterance and word sequence forces the discussion. We now should no longer ask the old question 'Which meaning is the meaning of the text?' but instead we should ask 'Which type of meaning is it important and valuable to pursue?' and 'Which type of text should we attempt to interpret?' Here is an argument in support of interpreting utterances. In interpreting the *utterance Hamlet*, we are trying to find out what Shakespeare actually said. There is, of course, historical value in knowing what Shakespeare said, but there is an important sort of humanistic value in knowing this too. Shakespeare was a person of genius with enormous insight into the human situation. And the intended meaning of a person of genius is likely to be the most valuable and rewarding meaning that we can find in that person's work. Therefore, that is the meaning at which interpretation should aim. And this is the same as saying that one should spend one's time interpreting utterances.

I believe that this is a strong justification for utterance interpretation. But it does not follow from this that the interpretation of word sequences is any less valuable. For, in dealing with word sequences we are still dealing with the work of a person of genius. This is why the point made earlier in this paper—that word sequences are also creations of the author—is so important. The meanings of the *word sequence Hamlet* are also Shakespeare's meanings. The work of a person of genius often has meanings and structural features with which that person did not intentionally endow it. Here I am not talking about subconscious meanings in a Freudian sense of that term. I am instead talking about the fact that a person of genius is often able to create a work of complex structure, of many levels, and hence a work of many meanings. Part of Shakespeare's genius is to have created in *Hamlet* a work which is pregnant with so much meaning. The complex meanings of a great work of art are usually not apparent at any one time but are gradually revealed

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over the years. Just as a carpenter can build a piece of furniture which turns out to have uses which he never anticipated, and a philosopher can construct a metaphysical system which is eventually shown to have implications which he never expected, so too a creative artist can produce a work which has meanings that he or she did not anticipate. Those unanticipated meanings will be of great interest and value because they result from the work of a person of genius. This allows us to value the word sequences of a great creative artist more highly than the word sequences of a lesser artist. So, if the argument is that we should aim at Shakespeare's meanings because Shakespeare, a man of genius, created them, this argument can also be used to support the value of interpreting word sequences as well. For those word sequences are also the creation of that very same man of genius.

I conclude that the Utterance Model does nothing to support the view that interpreters should aim exclusively at authorial intention. The distinction between utterance and word sequence constitutes an important advance in the theory of interpretation. My objection is not to this distinction but instead to the conclusion drawn by some that interpretation should work only with utterances and hence with authorial intentions. Word sequences have meanings which can be just as illuminating and valuable as the meanings of utterances.

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[3] Tolhurst, p. 9.

[4] Tolhurst, p. 5.

[5] Tolhurst, p. 11.

[6] Quentin Skinner, 'Motives, Intentions and the Interpretation of Texts' in David Newton-De Molina, *On Literary Intention* (Edinburgh University Press, 1976), p. 212.

[7] Tolhurst, p. 11.

[8] This point was anticipated by R. G. Collingwood in his *Principles of Art* (Clarendon Press, 1938), pp. 22–3. I am indebted to T. J. Diffey for this reference.

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