

Introduction

The Cultural Analysis of Others' Inner States

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Intentionality—or more broadly, the attribution of inner states—has long been the preserve of philosophical abstraction, psychological theorizing, and religious dictate. Yet it is, above all, a social and cultural phenomenon. Max Weber argued that social life consists mainly of discerning the meaning of another's acts and orienting one's own actions accordingly. But even if there is more to social life than Weberian meaning and orientation, such is the problematic nature of whether and how we concern ourselves with others' inner states that to leave them at the level of the universal and analytically abstract does injustice to their varied roles in human relationships.

Even the most passing consideration of intentionality suggests its value as an entry point into the analysis of a given cultural or historical circumstance. For what might at first seem to be a wholly ideational phenomenon is, in fact, deeply entwined with the nature and distribution of power, the portrayal of events, the assessment of personhood, the interplay of trust and deception, and the social assigning of moral and legal responsibility.

To consider intention in its fullest cultural context, one must, therefore, entertain a host of related questions: Who controls the way in which inner states will be attributed to others? How do different sectors of a population—or the state itself—characterize the intentions of those who fall within the ambit of their power? Why, in some cases, has the language of intent developed as a predominant vehicle for characterizing persons and their conduct, and what is the relationship of this emergent discourse to the rise of new social groupings? Are the interests of a religious or political elite, for example, served when they characterize others' inner states in a way that justifies the elite as intercessors, managers, or rulers? Indeed, what role does the portrayal of inner states play in the retention of ambiguous relationships in perilous or uncertain

times? For example, may the power of a ritual or its leader lie precisely in the enactment and resolution of the uncertainty normally encountered in *guessing at the intentions of the divine*?

In societies in which people place considerable stress on others' inner states, is the meaning of another's act understood on the basis of the prior assumptions with which individuals approach one another? Or do attributions of intention emerge from the repertoire of the comprehensible only when those intentions are enacted? And how, over the course of time, does the regularization of intention as a consideration for professional, religious, legal, and interpersonal concerns affect the most conventional assumptions by which people grasp their world and render it familiar?

The participants in the advanced seminar out of which this volume grew came to these questions with a varied and wide-ranging set of concerns. None began with the issue of intentionality uppermost in his or her prior scholarly work; none has a longstanding commitment to a particular theory of intent or a restrictive definition of it. To the contrary, our collective purpose, in both the seminar and in this book, has not been to deny the value of the philosophical, psychological, or theological literature on intentionality but to look in concrete detail at circumstances in which the question of inner states might prove illuminating. Toward this end, our written contributions—and even more so our week-long seminar conversations—were aimed at bringing the intentional into the realm of specific case studies and seeking theoretical approaches to the problem of inner states through concrete application.

Just as our seminar gathering presupposed nothing about how matters of intentionality ought to be composed, so, too, the present introduction is meant to serve not as a summation of positions reached but as a multidirectional glance at some of the issues our work has highlighted. “It’s a poor sort of memory,” said the White Queen to Alice, “that only works backwards”; it would be a poor recollection of our purpose and our contribution to one another’s chapters if we did not recount where we have been by also recalling where we might be going.



The thought of man is not triable; the devil alone knoweth the thought of a man.

—C. J. Brian, Court of Common Pleas, 1477

The state of a man's mind is as determinable as the state of his digestion.

—*Edgington v. Fitzmaurice*, 1889, 29 Chancery Division 459

On the face of it, any discussion of how we account for what lies within another person might seem an all-or-nothing proposition. Either one can imagine it possible to assess another's inner self or one cannot; either a culture has developed techniques for reading what is inside another or it has not; either one believes in a separable inner self or one does not. Yet as the preceding quotations suggest, the belief that another's mind is always hidden may be transformed into the belief that another's mind can be rendered visible. Indeed, the intentions or motives of another may even be simultaneously discernible and unavailable. Inner states thus may be a domain in which situation, context, purpose, and import play a crucial role in teasing out what may always remain half hidden.

In the quest for understanding intentionality, definitions obviously matter, for it is partly through our own analytical constructs that we ferret out—or imagine we have done so—the very thing we seek to discern. But if we are to avoid the false positivism of assuming that an inner state always exists, yet create a working image that may help us to discern *where* it might exist, it might be best to settle on no single definition but to gain a synoptic view—a view of cases, instances, and circumstances that, like different lenses, may be tried as instruments of revelation and used to help us determine whether we have truly seen what we imagine to be real.

It is in the fabrication of such a synoptic view that contrasting instances may prove most helpful. Toward this end, the essays in this volume can be placed alongside several other examples to show not only how we have circumscribed the subject of our collective exploration but also how the cases we have studied fit with others in which one can trace the implications of a discourse of inner states, the interplay between a rhetoric of intentionality and the exercise of personal and political power, and the connections between attributed states and changing patterns of social relationship.

Consider, for example, the way in which intentionality emerged as a cultural construct in Western civilization. The culture of archaic and classical Greece is said to have been characterized by “decision without choice, responsibility divorced from intention” (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1981:33; see generally, Adkins 1960; Snell 1953). Fault was largely attributed to malignant forces well beyond the control of human action. Specifically directed acts thus had to be understood against the background of a world in which the gods granted human acts their proper meaning. Even in fifth-century Athens, where, in the law and in the tragedy, some elements of a discourse of the will began to be elaborated, people’s enfoldment in family, polity, and sect continued to preclude any consistent emphasis on individual inner states. It was not that the Greeks failed to imagine that some acts were done with purpose and direction and that others had little to do with what one might have hoped to accomplish. Rather, their cultural emphasis on placing actions in the realm of the meaningful by playing up their relationship to the acts of the gods favored a discourse in which it was perfectly possible to account for events without interposing an elaborate artifice for getting at another’s inner state.

Notwithstanding Saint Augustine, until the eleventh or twelfth century Europeans continued to assume that overt acts and deeds were the proper index for interpreting another person’s meaning. It was largely during the twelfth century that religious scholars began to elaborate the idea of an inner self to which God and the Virgin Mary might attend (Duby and Braunstein 1988; Gilson 1940:343–63; Morris 1972). A new vocabulary of inner states began to develop, a way of assessing oneself and others that had repercussions in a host of domains of everyday life. In literature, for example, the romance replaced the epic as love became the link between inner world and outer and as self-awareness became an important focus of one’s spiritual and secular life (Hanning 1972; Logan 1986). In law, we see the beginnings of a more refined analysis of intentional states and the laying of the intellectual groundwork for a movement away from ordeals to more rational modes of proof.¹

The overall emphasis on the individual may have occurred, as Caroline Bynum has argued (1980), at the same time people became concerned with new models of social attachment, and it may therefore be that the rhetoric of an “inner landscape” precipitated out of the very need to choose among new forms of association. If so, the idea of intent itself may have served as a device mediating between unpredictable choice, on the one hand, and socially validated motivation, on the other. From the most arcane realms of theology and law to the most mundane

arena of popular romance and everyday attribution, a world once not required was, quite imaginatively, being brought into existence.

We in the West are very much the heirs to this altered discourse of the inner self. As Eugene Vance shows in chapter 5, when a student of Western literature looks at so recent a phenomenon as the United States Supreme Court's overturning a Texas statute prohibiting the burning of the American flag, he or she actually encounters the same failed theological discourse that marked far earlier discussions of the desecration of a religious symbol. It thus becomes almost impossible for us to imagine a social context in which the meaning of an act would not involve some consideration of what must have been its motive or intent. So pervasive, if contested, may be this focus on inner states that we imagine such states to be the basis for virtually every form of behavior. When Justice Holmes said that even a dog can tell the difference between being kicked and being tripped over, he underscored our commonsense acceptance of interiority as accessible even to lower animal orders. When Bismarck said, upon hearing of the death of the czar, "I wonder what he could have meant by that?" he showed just how far our explanatory scheme may have carried us.

Western Europe is not, of course, the only example in which a developing discourse of intentionality has varied theological and practical repercussions. A particularly intriguing case is that of Jewish law in the Mishnaic period (second century A.D.; see Eilberg-Schwartz 1986; Higger 1927; Neusner 1981).

Whether because of the destruction of the Temple and the onset of the Diaspora or because of scholarly attempts to systematize the law, the rabbis of this period strengthened the idea that spiritual purity could be retained if all objects and practices were conceived as occupying discrete and unmixed categories. But rather than simply establishing a rigid system of classification, they built on the idea that God had endowed humanity with the capacity to create categories of the pure by the human act of intending to use objects in a particular way. Unlike civil injuries, in which intention was given no role, criminal acts and the act of creating categories of the pure shared the feature of having direct contact with what God wished for people to do. These acts thus came to represent the human capacity, mirroring that of the divine, to give order to the world. Indeed, relying on intent may also have served as a way to disambiguate acts that could not be explained as part of the expected pattern of social behavior, thus allowing the new and varied practices that grew up around the Diaspora to be retained within the ambit of Jewish law.

Moreover, as Eilberg-Schwartz (1986:190–200) points out, the

theological emphasis on actors' intentions may also have been connected with the struggle for power in the post-exilic period. It removed from the hands of the old priestly class their exclusive ability to pronounce on the categories of the pure and thus to control permissible conduct. Unlike those priests, the sages who compiled the Mishna were not recruited by heredity. Their status depended on thought and deed, and by attributing this intellectual capacity to individuals of any background, they used a revised concept of intention as a vehicle for reforming the social hierarchy of their world.

More recent ethnographic examples suggest still other ways in which the contexts of relationship shape the presence or absence of a separable language of inner states. Some oppressed groups have restricted the attribution of inner selves to the domain of intracommunity communication. Others, more poignantly, act as if they have no inner lives of their own as a way of preserving their culture against the intrusion of hostile powers.² Silence and dissembling may thus become protective devices for peoples threatened with destruction: By avoiding talk about inner states, they can maintain a zone into which neither enemies nor the unproven can gain entry. The American slave song "Nobody Knows the Me Inside" captures one manifestation of this realm beyond the reach of the powerful. Similarly, the Mayas described by Kay Warren (chapter 3) throw up barriers against powerful Spanish-speakers as well as adapt to a climate of endemic terrorism when they profess that "each mind is a world," beyond the easy grasp of others.

Under such circumstances, boundaries become problematic—from the boundaries of what one is prepared to imagine about an inner self to the boundaries of one's very body, which others may use as a way of demonstrating their control. The questions of whom you can trust, with whom you can have relations, and to whom you can express your thoughts become deeply involved with every aspect of religion, history, and the present political climate.

Indeed, the problematic nature of inner states is underscored by societies in which people are strongly propelled to avoid assigning clear intentions at all, or in which developing a workable fiction about what another actually did or meant is far more central than the quest for any seemingly objective truth. The Sherpas of Nepal, as described by Robert Paul (chapter 2), do not view events in the world as objective facts, and thus they avoid making attributions that might appear to fix in the realm of the humanly observable what is conceived as possessing a reality beyond immediate human grasp. Law, religion, and ordinary interaction

thus meld into one another as the Sherpas' orientations toward others proceed without a need to disambiguate all acts within this world.

When people do make attributions of intent, what they often express is the way they wish to portray themselves through others and to control the way in which others are viewed. Catherine Lutz's analysis (chapter 7) of *National Geographic* depictions of native peoples is particularly telling in this regard. The white readers of the magazine could see indigenous people posed in such a way as to block concern for what they might be thinking or feeling—as when a native woman is shown looking away from the camera while we shamelessly observe her undraped form. The use of camera angles, contexts, and captions may lead readers to imagine that there is, indeed, nothing of real importance that is beyond the reader's grasp. Such photos do not have to be explicit about the other's thoughts to be dramatic mirrors to our own way of projecting interior worlds onto those whom we feel justified in directing.

In Western society, we make similar use of imagined intentions when, to take Marilyn Strathern's example (chapter 4), we condition the availability of certain fertility procedures on whether or not a woman means to have a traditionally constituted family. The state may set as a condition to its assistance that one possess the requisite motive or intent. We may ask, then, who will control the attribution of intentions in situations such as this: Is the British state able to make people question their intentions and modify their behavior by requiring that they display "proper" intentions before they can receive public help? Is the Guatemalan state studied by Kay Warren eager to impute the worst intentions to its own citizens in order to justify its repressive measures?

Similarly, is the United States Supreme Court's use of legislative intent rather than patterns of conduct as the test for racial discrimination merely a mask for carrying out a particular public policy that is more easily effected by emphasizing the individual interiority to which so much of American moral life is connected?³ Conversely, the use of intent as the central criterion for criminal liability may protect the individual against the state, which must prove one's inner state before gaining control of one's body. Yet we are still so unsure of our moral and philosophical grounding that we punish certain acts (e.g., statutory rape) regardless of intent,⁴ and we feel we cannot ask a jury to assume that someone intended all the natural and probable consequences of his act without the state's having to prove to us more directly what his intentions were.⁵

The power of attribution, whether it is made by private parties or by the state, may be very blunt or very subtle. When parents try to conduce

a child to act in a certain way by getting the child to agree to a certain state of feeling (“Don’t you really love your little sister, Johnny?”), it is because they believe they can control consequences by creating an inner condition. But this style of attributing intentions does not necessarily produce clear concepts or guidance for interpreting moral acts. In chapter 6, Leonard Kaplan’s account of Melville’s *Billy Budd* and the transformation of the moral ambivalence it embraces in later works such as one of Dürrenmatt’s detective novels and a Woody Allen film demonstrate that uncertainties about our own motivations are dependent on the very terms through which we imagine our inner selves.

The moral ambivalence connected with some attributions of intent is not unconnected to the question posed by Roy Wagner in chapter 8. In his reading of a New Guinea society, he asks whether one can really know one’s own intentions until some undertaking has occurred that brings them into the world of action. Indeed, is it possible that this particular society has institutionalized the tendency to avoid attributing inner states unless they are accompanied by overt acts, just as other societies may have institutionalized the obverse? Perhaps it is through unreflective action that we know our own intentions, or perhaps, as Marilyn Strathern suggests, people only apprehend their intentions when together they cast up some image of what they are doing. It is possible that neither in New Guinea nor aboard Melville’s fictional British man-o’-war need the priority of intent or act be clearly resolved to one side or the other. As circumstances change, the members of a culture may have more than one mutually contradictory set of assumptions upon which they can draw to make the acts of their fellows comprehensible.

The attribution of inner states may thus be one of those domains that is at once structurally open-ended and sufficiently delineated that people can still interpret one another’s acts.⁶ We can see the open-ended quality of intentionality, perhaps, when a language of inner states is just at the point of being transformed and extended along with other concepts such as probability and responsibility, as my own work in North Africa seeks to explore. It may also be visible, as Warren suggests, in situations in which the corrosive fear of envy encourages people to be imprecise in their inner attributions as a way of keeping spontaneity, choice, and freedom alive.

Amelie Rorty (chapter 10), however, reminds us that clarity and multivocality may be served in the quiet movement that often occurs toward the implicit grasp of another’s intention; passing acquaintance of another’s direction may be enough to carry us through. The channeling of attributions may not be unconnected to our tendency, in so overdeter-

mined a realm as that of intentionality, to grasp another's intent at one level while wholly missing it at another. She thus brings us full circle—to an appreciation of the ways in which cultures offer answers to questions that philosophy helps to pose, rather than the other way around.

Ours, then, is not an ethnographic map of intent or even a preferred routing for all who find the broad terrain it addresses worth exploring. It is meant as an indicator of some of the kinds of landmarks and pitfalls anyone who leaves the realm of abstract inner states may actually encounter. Just as each of us has been encouraged to address directly a complex set of issues that before had only caught our sideways glance, so, too, we hope that scholars from a wide range of disciplines will join us in thinking through the cultural components of attributed states and thus add to our understanding of our own and others' intentions.

Notes

1. On the history of intentionality in the common law, see Crawford and Quinn (1983); Marshall (1968); Plucknett (1960:51–76); Rosen (1985:61–67); Sayre (1932).

2. See, for example, Basso (1970); Ehrenreich (n.d.); Tefft (1980). Compare these situations to those in Duranti (1988) and Peletz (1988).

3. See generally Ortiz (1989) and Welch (1987). For the use of intent and motive in unfair labor practices, see Christensen and Svanoe (1968).

4. On strict liability, see Epstein (1973) and Wasserstrom (1960). Examples of several strict liability decisions will be found in United States Supreme Court (1943) and Supreme Court of Washington (1972). On the role of intent in cases of entrapment, see Dworkin (1985).

5. See United States Supreme Court (1979). See generally Kenny (1968:1–21, 1978).

6. A large part of the task of understanding the cultural contexts of intent and motive consists of studying the ways in which ambiguous elements are given more or less precision in the course of application. As Kenneth Burke (1969:xviii) noted: “We take it for granted that, insofar as men cannot themselves create the universe, there must remain something essentially enigmatic about the problem of motives, and that this underlying enigma will manifest itself in inevitable ambiguities and inconsistencies among the terms for motives. Accordingly, what we want is *not terms that avoid ambiguity, but terms that clearly reveal the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise*” (emphasis in original). On ambiguity and indeterminacy in cultural life generally, see Rosen (1991).