



What I really meant to say

Description

The lyrics of Crossfade's song *Cold* (2004) declare "What I really meant to say, Is I'm sorry for the way I am."• Annoyingly, the song keeps cropping up when I do a web search on idioms ascribing meanings to writers. But it kind of fits. Do we really know what we mean to say? Does the author of the words know any more than the recipient?

The same question applies to all creative production. Can you ever know the mind of the artist, writer, designer, architect or originator of a creative idea or product? I was also reminded of this conundrum as I read Paul Kidder's book *Gadamer for Architects* that explains the problem well from a hermeneutical perspective.

Authorial intent

There are at least three responses to the problem of an author's meaning. One is to try and get back to the author, scrutinise their interviews, diaries, articles, books, and if they are still alive then ask them their opinion settles the matter.



Scholars may debate what the author *really* meant, but

somewhere there's an **original meaning** that can be ascribed to the author-creator.

The second approach is to put any commentary an author may have about their own work to one side and presume that we know more than they do. In looking back at an author we may well, with the benefit of hindsight, be better able than they are to situate their work, and in any case weâ??ll know more about the effect their work has had.

But (third) from a hermeneutical perspective itâ??s more important to note that we know **differently** rather than know **better** or **more**. This is the nature of interpretation, to approach any interpretive task from a different **horizon**. This difference may be the product of the difference in time, being in a different place, culture, educational context, or social context. This is what keeps the interpretive process alive. The other two approaches tend to close off discussion or at least take it in the direction of *originality* and *authenticity*.

Social aspects of creation

As everyone knows, no matter how we ascribe authorship in any particular case, the fact remains that inventions are of their time and the products of many minds. Top of the poll for quotes about *originality* on the [Goodreads](#) website is â??Nothing of me is original. I am the combined effort of everyone Iâ??ve ever known.â?• â?? Chuck Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*. (Palahniuk wrote *Fight Club*.) The â??fallacyâ?• of authorial intention so often leaves out the social dimension of any particular achievement.

Hindsight bias

Iâ??ve been reading Daniel Kahnemanâ??s interesting book on â??fastâ?• and â??slowâ?• thinking. He provides sobering and unsettling evidence that we really are very unreliable when it comes to reporting our own state of knowledge. So there are many experts who claim they knew about the 2008 financial crisis before it happened, or talk as if they did. Similarly, I knew we would lose the tender. I knew the book would be misunderstood. I knew what I meant when I wrote it.

In fact the evidence shows that our knowledge about what we *knew* gets skewed according to what we *now* know â?? or think we know now.

Kahneman sees this as a weakness in human reasoning. But from a hermeneutical perspective such â??unreliabilityâ?• and forgetfulness indicates yet again how indebted we are to the shifting horizons within which we find ourselves â?? and enabled by them. We canâ??t think otherwise, and thank goodness for that. In any case, people to whom we ascribe authorship are as prone as their readers to their own shifting horizons and points of view.

Reference

- Kahneman, Daniel. 2011. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. London: Penguin
- Kidder, Paul. 2013. *Gadamer for Architects*. Abingdon, England: Routledge
- Kidder, Paul. 2011. Philosophical hermeneutics and *The Ethical Function of Architecture*. *Contemporary Aesthetics*, (9) ([online](#)), 6-6.

Notes

- Also see blog posts tagged [hermeneutics](#).

Category

1. Creativity

Tags

1. creativity
2. hermeneutics
3. interpretation
4. originality

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