



Best intentions

Description

My manners must have been in fault, but not *intentionally* I assure you. I never meant to deceive you (331) declared Mr Darcy in his reconciliation with Elizabeth in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. By this reading, to have an intention is to act with a goal in mind.

Most of us would rather deny an intention than claim one. After all, life is too random. Few people are so in control that they can with confidence assert that any particular consequence follows directly from a stated goal, as something they *intended* to happen from the beginning and stuck with all along.

To deny any intention for an action with bad consequences is one way to avoid being held to account, and incurring retribution. Denying intention also helps high achievers avoid looking smug, as when the actor humbly admits, "I never set out to win an Oscar."

Hermeneutical and poststructuralist scholars are also keen to point out the vexed nature of intentions. What an author, artist or designer *intends* by their actions is always open to debate, and the declaration by the creator of a work rarely settles the matter, as we've discussed elsewhere under the heading [What I really meant to say](#).



Intentionality

It's no wonder therefore that some of us have been reluctant to pick up on the phenomenological philosopher Edmund Husserl's (1859-1938) insistence that our experience of the world is best accounted for in terms of *intentionality*. He thinks we are intentional creatures. How can a philosopher like Heidegger's teacher so in tune with the contingent and practical nature of human experience in the world think that we are so goal directed?

Here the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) comes to my aid. The word 'intention' pertains more to 'attention' than the idea of a goal. The entry for *intend* begins with the following etymology:

Latin *intendĕre* to stretch out or forth, to strain, direct, spread out, increase, turn one's attention, purpose, endeavour, maintain, assert; in medieval Latin, also, to understand, interpret, < *in-* (in- prefix) + *tendĕre* to stretch, to tend v.

The first category of OED definitions pertains to stretching, the second to directing the eye and mind (attending) towards something. Only by the fifth category of definitions do we see something like direction towards a goal: 'To bend the mind to something to be done; to purpose, design, mean.'

The first two definitions help me make sense of Husserl's assertion that conscious perception involves 'being turned towards an object' (106), a theme (with modifications) that Heidegger would later explore in *Being and Time*.

For Husserl the world is not a catalogue of 'facts and affairs' but for the person in it, conscious and aware, appears as 'a world of values, a world of goods, a practical world. Without further effort on my part I find the things before me furnished not only with the qualities that befit their positive nature, but with value characters such as beautiful or ugly, agreeable or disagreeable, pleasant or unpleasant, and so forth' (93).

Attentionality

This is what it is to attend practically to something in the world: the path, the view, an oak, or the meadow; apprehended as steep, breathtaking, solid, or restful. Contrary to Husserl, Heidegger emphasises this attending as a break from our practical, unreflective, engagement in our everyday 'concernful dealings' in the world, that Hubert Dreyfus in his commentary on *Being and Time* describes as a *disturbance* (70).



All of this is relevant to my current considerations of *attention* in previous posts: [How geometry aids recollection](#), [Attending to the world](#), [Bear in the park](#), [A sudden prospect](#), [Aha moments](#), and [Frustration](#). Also see [Inconspicuous architecture](#).

Notes

- In comparing phenomenology with empirical psychology, P. Sven Arvidson says that in Husserl's opinion "intentionality is fundamental and attentionality is an extremely important modification of it" (203).

References

- Arvidson, P. Sven. 2013. Restructuring attentionality and intentionality. *Human Studies*, (36) 2, 199-216.
- Austen, Jane. 1985. *Pride and Prejudice*. London: Century Hutchinson. First published in 1813.
- Dreyfus, Hubert L. 1991. *Being-in-the-world: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press
- Husserl, Edmund. 1962. *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. Trans. W.R. Boyce Gibson. New York: Collier Books. First published in German in 1913.

Category

1. Nature

Tags

1. attention
2. Heidegger
3. intentionality

Date Created

July 25, 2015

Author

rcoyne99

default watermark