Howard Wettstein’s scholarly study of Keith Donnellan’s ideas about *having in mind*, in the context of reference and the referential use, is a provocative investigation of an underappreciated but nevertheless core notion produced by a major contributor to the literature on this topic. The paper proceeds in two stages: a study of the referential use as it is developed in “Reference and Definite Descriptions” (RDD) and then modified in light of the critique by Saul Kripke, and then a closer inspection of the key relation of *having in mind* and the role it plays in underwriting Donnellan’s conception of reference. Wettstein focuses attention on two “controversial” claims that he attributes to Donnellan: (a) the referential/attributive distinction has semantic significance, and in particular, referentially used definite descriptions are “devices of singular reference” (7), and (b) “in the referential case and only in that case, the description can refer (semantically) even when it fails to apply to the referent in virtue of the description’s literal meaning” (5). Wettstein is primarily concerned with the first of these, and he uses Kripke’s critique of it to focus our attention on *having in mind* as it figures into Donnellan’s characterization of the referential use. This consideration of *having in mind*, Wettstein argues, reveals a relation that requires both speaker intentions and a “real connection” with the intended referent. Without relinquishing the need for a cognitive fix, Donnellan abjures both the need for the “uniquely denoting conception” of Frege and the direct acquaintance of Russell in favor of “the right sort of historical connection” with the referent (14).

Before moving into the details of Wettstein’s account, it might be worth pausing to note the various (possibly conflicting) conditions placed by Donnellan on the referential use in RDD. These can help us frame our understanding both of the reference as he develops it and its dependence on *having
in mind. Going through RDD, I count 12 distinct conditions, listed on the handout. (These are repeated in abbreviated and condense form in “Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again”, p. 206.) The first four focus on the audience-relative character of the referential use; conditions 5 through 9 express aspects of what Wettstein calls Donnellan’s second “controversial” claim above, 10 and 11 concern presupposition or the cognitive context within which the speaker uses the description, and 12 focuses on what can be said about the utterance once it is over. Putting these together, we might say that the referential use is a type of robust (i.e., resilient in the face of infelicities), audience-directed speech act that can “go through” even in cases of infelicity because of the speaker’s connection with the referent, as reflected in the presuppositions; once the speech act produces the connection in the audience, they can repeat or report the point in any fashion they please so long as the connection is maintained.

I’ll begin with a couple of hesitant remarks about the interpretation of Donnellan on offer here, followed by a few reflections on themes introduced in this stimulating paper. I’ll close by sketching a conception of having in mind that goes off in a direction that might be a bit more congenial to Wettstein’s own views.

First, I’m not sure that it’s quite right to say that “Donnellan does not mention the intention-trumps-literal meaning idea until well into the paper” (6), given that it is a featured part of the section in which the distinction is introduced, section III. Perhaps the urge to see it this way is explained by how uncomfortably this idea fits with Wettstein’s emphasis on the semantic significance of the referential/attributive distinction, and especially on the idea that referentially used definite descriptions are devices of singular reference. So long as we understand ‘semantic significance’ here as bound up with conventions and truth conditions in the “semantic terrain of Russell vs. Strawson”, I’m not at all sure that RDD supports this emphasis. It is true that later Donnellan papers, written after the Kripke critique, join semantics understood in this way, but RDD seems quite uninterested in identifying abstract, conventional patterns for use in assigning propositions to utterances. Rather, it seems locked
onto the practical task of communicating successfully with audiences about things in the world. These aren’t unrelated, to be sure, but they do stand as different emphases. It is telling that the audience is mentioned early and often in RDD, and Donnellan also talks about “reference [going] through”, a locution that suggests an essential connection between reference and the pursuit of practical, communicative goals. Also, the primary notion of truth is “truth about”, a notion that Donnellan regards as novel and in need of “investigation”. For what it’s worth, I have come around to thinking that the Donnellan of RDD was up to something very out of the ordinary—something like a critique of the Russell-Strawson debate set in the semantic terrain of Grice and Wittgenstein—but was pulled back into the more ordinary fold by critics and others at work on issues in reference.

Also, the interpretation of having in mind in terms of a “cognitive connection historically based, between the referent and the current speech ... act” (15) would appear to conflict with Donnellan’s insistence in section IV that his distinction is not a matter of belief. One could respond that the cognitive connection required by Donnellan’s Russelianism needn’t involve belief, although the interpretation does depend on de re attitudes that enable a speaker to be en rapport with the referent. It seems quite clear that one could run arguments similar to those found in section IV of RDD to call the centrality of these attitudes into question. Perhaps one could argue that the historical connection needn’t be represented cognitively—that it need only exert influence on cognition in some externalist fashion; however, this starts to look less and less like something one has in mind.

Turning now to more open ended reflection on themes broached by Wettstein, I begin with speaker reference and speaker intention. Wettstein points out that one way to put the second “controversial” claim above is that “in the case of the referential use, speaker’s intentions ... trump literal meaning” (6). The speaker reference in a given case is whom or what the speaker intended to refer to. As he notes, intention “is a philosophically interesting and in some ways puzzling notion”, but it is a common one, and in this context, it is asked to do a lot of work. For example, there are a number of
distinct applications of the notion to reference and the referential use in Wettstein’s paper and in RDD, nine of which are on the handout. There are subtle differences between each of these, and this list doesn’t even touch on those intentions that structure the part of the non-referential part of the speech. Rigorous characterization of speaker reference understood in terms of speaker intention seems like a very tall order. (For example, this point suggests that the “simple vs. complex cases” distinction is really a lot more complex than is described, and in relevant ways.)

I think it is worth asking what role intention plays here. Does it capture the phenomenology of speech? Not in general. Does it reflect the strategies we consciously employ as interpreters? Perhaps at times, in difficult cases, but again, not in general. One possibility is that introduction of speaker intentions captures the sense that speakers are in control of what they say, and so they norm speech in a way that makes diagnosis possible in the pathological cases. This is consistent with the treatment of pathological cases in RDD, where they are a common discussion item.

Moving on it would seem that for Donnellan, failure is not an option. At least not reference failure, most of the time. The history professor case is used by Donnellan to answer the question, “Can reference fail when a definite description is used referentially?” His answer: rarely, and then only in “radical” cases where there is “nothing of which it can be said, ‘That is what he was referring to.’” As speakers, we make mistakes, taking rocks to be history professors or, as in my case, mountain goats. But these mistakes don’t undermine reference in most cases—they can downgrade the “felicity” of a referring act, but even in those cases that are infelicitous, reference can “go through”.

This is one place where I think the communicative interpretation of Donnellan’s distinction as developed in RDD has an advantage over the semantic interpretation. As Wettstein develops it, the semantic interpretation supports a distinction between having something in mind and failing to refer to it, but this would appear to be disallowed by Donnellan. But if you take mention of the audience seriously, then this makes sense. You can succeed in referring to the professor-like rock if this consists in
referring someone to the rock. It is ‘to refer’ in this employment that seems fundamental for the development of Donnellan’s distinction in RDD. One textual point in favor of this is the fact that while Donnellan initially describes the “trick of the light” reference failure case from the perspective of the speaker, the official failure condition is cast in the third-person, suggesting that it is our audience who is in a position to pass judgment here. (This does not imply that they have to get it for reference to be successful; only that it is possible for them to get it.)

My final remark is less about Wettstein’s paper than the relation of having in mind in general. The referential use in RDD is closely tied to having in mind: we use definite descriptions to refer to what we have in mind. Naturally, this suggests that when we use descriptions referentially, we are locked onto a particular thing that forms part of the content of our referential intentions. It is this that gives us a “cognitive fix” on the item and determines what we seek to communicate to our audience. But having some particular thing in mind is certainly not sufficient for the referential use, and it is arguably not necessary. Even so, having in mind is a crucial part of the story, but what part? I take it to be epistemic not metaphysical in character—in general, it doesn’t pick out an element that is involved in the production of referentially used descriptions; rather, it identifies an explanatory strategy that is used primarily in pathological situations as a way of diagnosing just what the speaker is trying to do (e.g., what she is trying to talk about). Having in mind is tied essentially to action, but not to intention. In fact, it seems that you could argue that an agent could “have some particular thing in mind” even though they lack an occurrent or consciously accessible cognitive fix on the item. So long as an agent’s actions are keyed to how things stand with a particular object, she could be said to have it in mind. Differential connection of this type with a particular object could be underwritten by something like recognitional knowledge, or perhaps it could be dependent on institutional or more broadly social structures that constrain individual action. If this is on the right track, then having some thing in mind implies intentional action but not intentions.