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Article

On collectively assigning features to artifacts¹

Sobre a atribuição coletiva de características a artefatos

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ABSTRACT

The common notion of artifacts characterizes them as the products of successful activities of their makers, guided by intentions that such objects would instantiate certain features, such as their specific functions. Many counterexamples, however, reveal the unsuitability of the common notion. In the face of this acknowledgment, the paper explores the possibility that features of artifacts, and more specifically, the possession of their functions, may arise, at least partially, from collective assignments. In order to achieve the mentioned goal, the paper critically examines some notions and theses put forward by John Searle (1996; 2010) and others. Its main result, however, consists in offering and elucidating an original thesis, namely, that the functions of many artifacts would be maintained, partially, by forms of continuous collective intentionality, which can involve conscious or unconscious, active or inactive collective intentional states.

Keywords: Artifacts, assignment of function, collective intentionality, maintenance of function.

RESUMO

A noção comum de artefatos os caracteriza como produtos de atividades bem-sucedidas de seus fabricantes, orientadas por intenções de que tais objetos instanciassem determinadas características, tais

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como suas funções específicas. Diversos contraexemplos, no entanto, revelam a inadequação da noção comum. Diante dessa constatação, o artigo explora a possibilidade de que características de artefatos, e mais especificamente, a posse de suas funções, possam decorrer, ao menos em parte, de atribuições coletivas. Para atingir o referido objetivo, o artigo examina de forma crítica algumas noções e teses propostas por John Searle (1996; 2010) e outros. Seu principal resultado, no entanto, consiste em oferecer e elucidar uma tese original, a saber, que as funções de muitos artefatos seriam mantidas, parcialmente, por formas de intencionalidade coletiva contínua, que podem conter estados intencionais coletivos conscientes ou inconsciente, ativos ou inativos.

Palavras-chave: Artefatos, atribuição de função, intencionalidade coletiva, manutenção de função.

Artifacts are usually thought to be the products of their makers' activities, guided by intentions to assign or impose them determinate features. If a maker is successful in her or his attempts, an object with the intended features is created. One plausible view, which agrees with our pre-philosophical intuitions, conceives the existence of an artifact as depending only on the successful intentions of its maker, an existence that ends with some sort of physical destruction of the object. However, it may be the case that not only makers impose or assign features to objects. We would do this by considering them as being of one artifactual kind or another, e.g. as screwdrivers or hammers, and by using them accordingly. In fact, we believe that hammers have the function of nailing nails and screwdrivers of driving screws, and we attribute these beliefs to a group to which we presumably belong. Such collective beliefs may be irrelevant to the existence of artifacts. Nonetheless, I wish to investigate here the merits of an alternative view. In spite of being less agreeable to our ordinary intuitions, it may be the case that our collective beliefs about the nature of artifacts contribute in some way to their existence. The paper is an attempt to elucidate and evaluate this less intuitive view.

Artifacts are commonly conceived as modified objects that are the intended products of their makers' activities (Hilpinen, 1992, p. 60; 2011). However, some counterexamples render the common notion of artifacts problematic. Dan Sperber (2007) presents cases of entities that we would intuitively recognize as artifacts, although they do not satisfy one or another condition of the common notion. A stone that is used as a weapon may not have been modified and a village may be formed without anyone having the intention to bring it into existence. More significantly, Sperber emphasizes that there are reasons to consider some biological structures as artifacts, even though they do not satisfy any of the conditions that compose the common notion of artifacts (Sperber, 2007, p. 125). He offers the example of leeches used medicinally to perform bloodletting. Although they are neither standard objects, nor have been modified in accordance with human purposes, leeches have an artifactual function, in the sense that they are used in order to achieve a determinate intended effect (Sperber, 2007, p. 129). Other cases that do not seem to fit under the common notion of artifacts involve objects whose most defining features, such as their proper functions, change after their material fabrication. Church buildings that were later desacralized to serve as bookstores and concert venues are good examples of such cases.

The mentioned counterexamples to the common notion of artifact motivate the search for an alternative conception. One candidate is offered by the thesis that artifacts are at least partially constituted by our collective beliefs about their nature. According to this thesis, makers certainly assign features to artifacts in their creative activities, but the existence of the artifacts depends in some sense also on what we, who are not makers, take them to be. To explore this thesis, the paper discusses the view, offered by John Searle in *The Construction of Social Reality - TCSR* - (1996) and in *Making the Social World* (2010), that functions are acquired and maintained by means of assignments of functions. A function is conceived as that what an entity is for. In the case of artifacts, it is a reasonable claim that their functions

are among their essential features, determining what they are, their nature². Assignments of functions have, as Searle remarks, the form "X is to Y".

Searle argues that "functions are never intrinsic," but intentionality-relative (Searle, 1996, p. 14; 2010, p. 59)³. They differ in this respect from causal mechanisms, which are conceived as natural phenomena. The claim that functions are intentionality-relative implies that functional entities are also intentionality-relative. This position in regard to functions and functional entities is not uncontroversial. Not only artifacts are usually conceived to have functions, but also biological structures, such as hearts and claws. In respect to biological functions, Searle's claim that they are intentionality-relative opposes the current orthodoxy, which acknowledges a naturalistic conception of biological functions⁴. Searle's position is manifested in the following passage:

It is, for example, intrinsic to nature that the heart pumps blood and causes it to course through the body (...). But when in addition to saying "The heart pumps blood" we say, "The function of the heart is to pump blood," we are doing something more than recording these intrinsic facts (Searle, 1996, p. 14).

Searle offers different reasons in favor of the controversial position that all functions and functional entities are intentionality-relative. One interesting reason consists in the view that functions are "relative to a system of values" (Searle, 1996, p. 15; 2010, p. 59)⁵. It is easy to recognize how the function of an artifact, such as a fork, is relative to or dependent on a system of values. With a fork we are capable of eating without using our hands. Eating with our hands is inappropriate in many circumstances, in the sense that it disregards hygiene and etiquette standards held by many. The system of values to which forks and other dining instruments are relative is clearly intentionality-relative. Eating with our hands is not intrinsically bad. Searle argues that the same applies to the natural phenomena. They would also be relative to a system of values, such as the values associated with surviving and reproduction. He claims that "... the attribution of these values to the nature independent of us is [intentionality-relative]" (Searle, 1996, p. 15). Searle does not offer an explicit argument at this point. However, an argument can be attributed to him in the following lines: since a system of values in regard to natural phenomena is intentionality-relative, then the functions we associate with biological structures, which are taken to be relative to systems of values, must be also intentionality-relative. The function of a heart and the function of a claw, e. g., are conceived to be intentionality-relative since they are relative to the values we assign to nature⁶.

² Searle explicitly rejects the claim that an artifact is a new object that differs from the material object to which a function is assigned (Searle, 1996, p. 57). In this paper, I ignore this controversial aspect of his view. Functions are essential and, therefore, intrinsic properties of artifacts. Given that a material object to which a function is assigned did not have the function before the assignment, then it cannot be identical to the artifact.

³ See Gouvea (2016) for a critical discussion on Searle's account of intentionality-relative features of the world, and some suggestions of improvement.

⁴ According to Allen (2003), "[m]any contemporary biologists and philosophers of biology believe that teleological notions are a distinctive and ineliminable feature of biological explanations but that it is possible to provide a naturalistic account of their role".

⁵ Other reasons that were offered in favor of Searle's notion of function indicate that the standard naturalistic conception of function would not address some aspects of our ordinary notion of function. According to Searle, the standard naturalistic conception of function diverges from the ordinary notion in the following respects: it restricts the explanation of a function "to a causal historical account"; it implies the acknowledgement of functions that would not be recognized by means of the ordinary notion; and it leaves the normative component of functions unexplained (Searle, 1996, p. 17). A further reason presented in favor of Searle's controversial position is the claim that attributions of functions are "intensional-with-an-s" (Searle, 1996, p. 18). Searle argues that the expression that specifies the function of an entity in a sentence of the form "X is to Y" cannot be indiscriminately substituted without changing the truth value of the sentence. I do not take these reasons to justify the claim that functions of biological structures are intentionality-relative.

⁶ The following passage supports the attribution of this line of thought to Searle: "It is because we take for granted in biology that life and survival are values that we can discover that the function of the heart is to pump blood. If we thought the most important value in the world was to glorify God by making thumping noises, then the function of the heart would be to make a thumping noise, and the noisier the heart would be the better heart" (Searle, 1996, p. 15).

I do not want to take a stance in the debate concerning the origins of functions of biological structures, i.e., whether they are intentionality-relative or intrinsic to nature. I am not convinced by Searle's reasons to consider biological functions as intentionality-relative, but I do not think that a refutation of this view would help achieving the aim of this paper, which involves investigating the general features and the conditions of constitution of artifacts and wondering about the kind of intentional states to which artifacts are supposed to be relative.

Before addressing the issue of whether the existence of artifacts depends in some sense on our collective beliefs, I wish to elucidate Searle's distinction between individual and collective intentionality. Searle (1996) draws this distinction initially from the grammatical form of the states manifesting the two kinds of intentionality (p. 25). Individual intentional states have the forms "I intend...", "I desire...", "I believe..." etc. Intentional states manifesting collective intentionality, in contrast, are characterized by the grammatical forms "we intend...", "we desire...", "we believe..." etc. According to Searle (1996), another distinctive feature of collective intentional states is their irreducibility to individual intentional states. The irreducibility thesis is supported by the view that collective intentional states must be conceived from the perspective of a group. In some important sense, the perspective of a group will not to be found in the cases that can be fully described by attributions of individual intentional states to individuals. If an intentional state with the form "we intend...", "we desire..." or "we believe..." can be fully represented by a sentence of the form of "I intend... and you intend...", "I desire... and you desire..." or "I believe... and you believe...", then it does not manifest collective intentionality, since it is not conceived from the perspective of a group. For example, if the intentional state represented in "We intend to paint the house" can be represented by "I intend to paint the house and you intend to paint the house", then it was not actually conceived from the perspective of a group. It is not a case of collective intentionality⁷.

According to the thesis that artifacts are intentionality-relative, they can either depend on individual or on collective intentional states. There is some plausibility in the view that artifacts are public objects, items of a culture that stems from and pervades the perspective of a group. Indeed, our experience with artifacts suggests that these entities are not conceived as being relative to an individual, but to a community or group of people. In a passage from the *Cartesian Meditations*, Edmund Husserl emphasizes the relation between artifacts and specific groups:

In addition, Objects with 'spiritual' predicates belong to the experienced world. These Objects, in respect of their origin and sense, refer to subjects, usually other subjects, and their actively constituting intentionality. Thus it is in the case of all cultural Objects (books, tools, works of any kind, and so forth), which moreover carry with them at the same time the experiential sense of thereness-for-everyone (that is, everyone belonging to the corresponding cultural community, such as the European or perhaps, more narrowly, the French cultural community, and so forth (Husserl, 1960 [1950], p. 92).

Despite the technical philosophical vocabulary, the quoted passage describes the way in which we usually experience artifacts in our ordinary lives. It emphasizes that artifacts are in general conceived as being relative to the perspective of groups, and not to the perspective of single individuals. It is in this sense that the thesis that artifacts are relative to or constituted by collective intentionality should be understood.

Searle reserves the expression "social facts" to facts involving collective intentionality (Searle, 1996, p. 26, 38, 122). Thus, if the possession of a function by an artifact depends on collective intentionality, it would be called a social fact. In order to restrict the ontological categories that we are dealing with in

⁷ Searle (2010) accepts the reducibility of collective to individual intentional states in some forms of collective intentionality, such as collective recognition. Cases of collective recognition would be reducible to instances of individual recognition plus the common knowledge of these instances by the individuals involved (Searle, 2010, p. 58).

this paper, let us use the expression “social objects” to refer to objects that are dependent on collective intentionality, in the sense of being dependent on collective intentional states. The claim that social objects are dependent on collective intentionality admits at least two interpretations. On the one hand, we can suppose that an instantiation of a collective intentional state in the mind of a single individual satisfies the referred dependence condition. On the other hand, we can assume that collective intentional states must be shared in order to take part in the constitution of genuine and not just putative *social* objects. Searle (1996) does not argue in favor of such a condition of sharedness, and does not offer any hint of how collective intentional states could be shared. I address the problem of deciding among the two interpretations by recognizing that occurrences of a collective intentional state involve the attribution of occurrences of the same intentional state to others. When someone asserts the sentence “we believe that hammers have the function of nailing”, she represents an occurrence of a collective intentional state in her mind that clearly involves attributions of occurrences of the same state to others, namely the individuals belonging to the group whose perspective is assumed. Even if not all involved attributions are made true by the intentional states of the individuals of the respective group, a collective intentional state is shared if at least another member of the group instantiates the state in question. If a collective intentional state is not shared in this undemanding conception, there is an important sense in which the person that entertains the state fails to achieve the perspective of a group. For this reason, the condition of sharedness is assumed here for the occurrence of genuine cases of collective intentionality and, thus, for the constitution of social objects.

One difficulty that stands against any attempt to understand artifacts in general as social objects is that at least some artifacts do not seem to depend on collective intentional states. Amie Thomasson (2003) recognizes this fact, and draws strong conclusions from it. Thomasson argues:

... artifacts (...) need not be the products of collective intentions nor depend on collective beliefs, and thus (if one accepts the common definition of social entities as those involving collective intentionality) they need not be properly social objects in the way that institutional entities must be (Thomasson, 2003, p. 599).

Thomasson (2007) reinforces the contrast between artifacts and the objects that, in her conception, would be properly called social:

Unlike social and institutional objects, the existence of artifacts doesn't seem to presuppose any collective intentions of any kind—it makes perfect sense to suppose that a solitary human could create a knife, though not a government or money (Thomasson, 2007, p. 52).

It is possible that, in some cases, only the maker of an artifact knows about its function. In the cases of solitary makers, each may think that she is the only person to know about it. The probability increases if the solitary maker considers its creation to be a prototype, i.e. the first instance of an artifactual kind. If this is the case, then she might not entertain the intentional state that a group assigns the function *Y* to the produced artifact or to the artifactual kind to which the artifact belongs. Rather, the maker might believe that the fact that an artifact is to perform the function *Y* presents itself only to her eyes. In some cases, such beliefs of solitary makers might be true, and Thomasson is right in arguing that these artifacts are not social objects. However, the solitary maker may be ignorant in respect to what others know about the product of her creative activities. A solitary maker that manufactures a knife is wrong if she believes that the possession of the function of cutting by that item is relative only to her perspective and not to the perspective of others. We take knives to have the function of cutting and we take this feature to be relative to the intentionality of a group to which we presumably belong. Our collective intentional states in this respect are, in my view, enough to make the knife of the solitary maker a social object.

Although an attempt to characterize artifacts by means of the notion of social objects may be ill-fated, it is clear that a significant number of the former falls under the extension of the latter. Artifacts usually satisfy the condition of being considered relative to collective intentional states. They are, in Husserl's words, "... Objects [with 'spiritual' predicates], [which] in respect of their origin and sense, refer to subjects, usually other subjects, and their actively constituting intentionality" (1960 [1950], p. 92). If we leave aside the cases of artifacts whose functions are conceived to be relative only to the intentionality of their makers, we obtain a set of artifacts that are rightfully called social objects. They need not contrast with biological artifacts, which are excluded from the common notion of artifact. However, in investigating the general aspects of social objects, I will ignore any peculiarity of biological artifacts.

According to the common notion, the creation of an artifact involves intentional states about some of its features. It asserts that a maker tries to impose certain features to the product of her activities. Among these features, the artifact's function is certainly the most significant. Thus, we might expect that among the intentional states of the maker about the features she tries to impose to the artifact there is one whose content has the form "X is to Y."

If an artifact is a social object, then its maker alone cannot be said to turn it into such an object. According to the stipulative definition of "social objects" presented above, its extension consists only of objects that depend on collective intentionality, which, as I have argued, occurs when collective intentional states are shared. The condition of shared collective intentionality may sound excessive, since the imposition of the function by the maker's activities may be enough for there to be an artifact with a certain function. In the following, I will argue that even if collective intentional states do not take part in the creation of an artifact, they can change the conditions of its continued existence⁸.

The common notion of artifacts asserts that a maker imposes a function to an artifact by means of modifying activities that, when successful, result in an object with the intended features. Those who are not makers do not impose features to artifacts in this way. They do not perform modifying activities. Nonetheless, this does not imply that others cannot share with the maker of an artifact an intentional state concerning, for instance, its function. In fact, utterances in this respect and similar usage patterns of artifacts indicate that people have collective intentional states, more specifically, collective beliefs about the functions of a large variety of artifactual kinds. This should not be a matter of controversy. It means that we usually and truly conceive the function of artifacts of various kinds as not being relative to our individual perspective, but relative to the perspective of a group. The questions that must be addressed are whether these collective intentional states from non-makers are actual cases of assignment of function.

Searle explicitly acknowledges that there is a practical way of assigning or imposing functions to artifacts, which contrasts with the makers' modifying activities. However, his position in regard to this alternative way of imposing a function is not entirely unambiguous. In an early passage of *TCSR*, Searle argues that "the person actually using some object for (...) [a] function may not be the agent who actually imposed the function on that object and may even be unaware that the object has that function" (Searle, 1996, p. 21). I take this claim to be not only unjustified, but also incompatible with a position that Searle maintains later in the book, when he argues that "one way to impose a function on an object is just to start using the object to perform that function" (p. 126). I refer to this way of imposing a function with the term "practical assignment of function." Since Searle characterizes an assignment or imposition of function as "a feature of intentionality" (Searle, 1996, p. 14), we can attribute to him the view that also cases of practical assignment of function involve intentional states whose content has the form "X is to Y."

⁸ Marcel Scheele (2006) argues that some artifacts would be socially constituted, but his thesis concerns only a very restricted set, a subclass of the artifacts that count as social objects. Scheele (2006) does not present and argue for his thesis as an answer to the question of how artifacts maintain their functions.

Until this point, two ways of assigning or imposing functions have been recognized. A function is imposed to an artifact in the modifying activities of the makers or in the practical assignment of functions of the users. It is not clear whether Searle acknowledges only these two ways of imposing functions. I argue below that there are two other ways that should also be acknowledged.

According to Searle, the cases of practical assignment of functions contrast with the ones that “involve explicit intentionality” (Searle, 1996, p. 126). Since the function of an artifact is its most significant feature, it is expected that the maker might consciously or explicitly consider its function. This may occur while determining or performing the appropriate modifying activities for the production of the artifact, or in evaluating whether they were successful. Someone who did not produce a certain artifact can also instantiate an explicit or conscious state about the function of the artifact or the respective artifactual kind. When we read or hear about the function of an artifact or artifactual kind, or when we write or tell someone about it, it is expected that we consciously entertain an intentional state whose content has the form “X is to Y”. For example, when someone tells another that a coronary stent is to keep coronary vessels open, both the speaker and the hearer are expected to entertain conscious intentional states concerning the function of coronary stents. Despite being unusual, we can also consciously consider the function of an artifact or artifactual kind outside circumstances of communication.

Above, I have proposed the question of whether non-makers’ collective intentional states about the functions of artifacts or artifactual kinds consist in actual cases of assignment of function. I consider this question to be composed of two more specific, complementary questions. One makes reference to explicit or conscious intentionality: are the non-makers’ explicit or conscious collective intentional states about the functions of artifacts or artifactual kinds actual cases of assignment of function? The other question concerns implicit intentionality: are the non-makers’ implicit or non-conscious collective intentional states about the functions of artifacts or artifactual kinds actual cases of assignment of function?

In regard to the first, more specific question, there is a strong reason in favor of a positive answer, namely that an explicit or conscious recognition of the function of an artifact might enable its subsequent use. We can learn the function of some unusual tool by reading about it, or by being told about what it is for. Even in the unusual cases in which, outside circumstances of communication, we consciously entertain an intentional state about the function of an artifact or an artifactual kind, the conscious state can play a decisive role in the subsequent use of the artifact. For instance, the careful consideration of the functions of different tools might indicate which one is the most appropriate for a certain practical task.

In regard to the second question, a partial answer has already been given. Cases of practical assignment of function have been conceived as involving implicit or non-conscious intentional states whose contents have the form “X is to Y.” However, these cases do not exhaust the instances of implicit or non-conscious collective intentional states about the functions of artifacts or artifactual kinds. Intentional states can persist when subjects are no longer conscious of them. Searle explicitly endorses this view, claiming that “there is no necessary connection between being an intentional state at a time and being conscious then and there” (Searle, 1996, p. 7). Complementarily, I claim that there is no necessary connection between instantiations of intentional states and a current action performed by an agent. Experience reveals that beliefs and desires persist even when they do not take part in a certain action. Moreover, if weakness of will is a legitimate phenomenon, it shows that our actions can even contradict what we think is the best to do. I take this to be enough evidence for the claim that intentional states can persist when they are non-conscious and inactive, in the sense that they do not take part in any current action.

In the case of collective intentional states about the function of an artifact or artifactual kind, their occurrences do not depend on them being conscious nor on any current performance of the function in question. This claim implies that, e.g., even when I do not use a screwdriver nor consciously consider its function, it can be the case that I have the intentional state that screwdrivers are to drive screws and that the possession of such function is relative to the perspective of a group. But are non-conscious and in-

active intentional states of this kind actual cases of assignment of function? Does some occasional user of screwdrivers impose a function to them when she is neither (consciously) considering their function, nor performing it?

The claim that assignments of function can be realized by non-conscious and inactive collective intentional states may be disputed on different grounds. Some reasons for skepticism are the following: assignments of function are supposed to be actively executed, and a person remains passive in respect to the workings of his or her non-conscious and inactive intentional states (if there are any); assignment of functions are supposed to be easily recognized, and there seems to be no way of distinguishing instantiations of non-conscious and inactive intentional states from the lack thereof.

The mentioned reasons for skepticism can be addressed as follows. Firstly, the claim that assignments of functions are actively executed does not cover cases of practical assignment in which the function of an artifact is continuously performed after an initial action. Sitting on a chair might be an active assignment of function, but remaining seated and occupying our thoughts with something else, which still counts as a practical assignment of function, is not. Secondly, the claim that we cannot know whether a non-conscious and inactive intentional state is instantiated or not contradicts the fact that we have reasons to attribute such states to ourselves and others. Based on the thesis that intentional states can persist when subjects are not conscious of them, we have reason to consider manifestations of practical and explicit assignments of functions as evidence for attributing instantiations of non-conscious and inactive intentional states about the possession of such functions at later stages. The interdependency of mental states asserted by a holistic conception of the mind suggests an even larger evidence base.

One reason in favor of the claim that non-conscious and inactive collective intentional states are actual cases of assignment of function is that it offers an explanation for the continued possession of a function by an artifact. Since an artifact loses a function by its physical destruction, the kind of explanation offered by continuous intentionality is partial. Usual alternative explanations assert that the continued possession of a function is guaranteed by the physical structure of the artifact, or that it is guaranteed by its causal history and material constitution, which includes the fact that the artifact was manufactured to have this function.

I will address, first, the claim that non-conscious and inactive collective intentional states offer an explanation for the continued possession of a function by an artifact. Once again, I depart from Searle. He claims that "it is generally (...) the case that [artifactual] (...) functions require the continuous intentionality on the part of users for their maintenance" (Searle, 1996, p. 21).⁹ The claims that functions "are assigned from outside by conscious observers and users" and that "functions require (...) continuous intentionality (...) for their maintenance" can be interpreted in two ways. They can mean either that the possession of a function by an artifact depends on the simultaneous interaction of subjects with the artifact in question, or that it depends on some other feature of the intentionality of subjects that are qualified as possible observers and users of the artifact. I consider the position associated with the first interpretation to be absurd, and the one suggested in the second, unsatisfactory. The first implies that, when ignored, an artifact ceases to have its function. If the function is an essential property of an artifact, then, by the first position, the artifact would cease to exist when no one is using or observing it. The other position is unsatisfactory, because it does not specify the feature of the intentionality of possible

⁹ It is not significant for the position I wish to stress here that Searle weakens the claim by adding in the original passage that "it is generally, though by no means always, the case that ..." (Searle, 1996, p. 21). The context in which this remark is made suggests that some users do not know the function of the artifact they are using, and, thus, their intentionality does not contribute to the maintenance of the function. Searle gives the example of a drive shaft, whose function is probably unknown to most drivers. By accepting the notion of a practical assignment of function, I dispute that subjects might be said to use an artifact without imposing it a function by means of an intentional state. In the case of a drive shaft, I would rather say that a driver does not use it, although its functioning is a condition for the use of the car. However, even if there are cases in which users do not contribute to the maintenance of an artifact's function, as Searle's suggests, the role of a "continuous intentionality" is not questioned by his remark. His position seems to be that, if not users, then other subjects must continuously instantiate intentional states that guarantee the continuous possession of a function by an artifact.

observers and users that is said to guarantee the continued possession of a function by an artifact. I will argue below that non-conscious and inactive collective intentional states could do the job.

A non-conscious and inactive intentional state consists in a form of continuous intentionality. As argued above, intentional states can persist even if subjects are not conscious of them and if they do not take part in a current action. The possibility of sharing a non-conscious and inactive collective intentional state allows a much wider form of continuous intentionality. The intentionality continues until the last individual that shares or shared a collective intentional state ceases to instantiate it. It is important to remark that, in some cases, the set of members of the group whose perspective is assumed by means of a collective intentional state is not restricted, in the sense that it may include different individuals as time passes. In these cases, intentionality may be continuous even if the original members of the group have ceased to instantiate the relevant collective intentional state, as long as some individual, to whom the state was attributed at a subsequent moment by a member of the group, continues to instantiate it. By acknowledging that assignments of function can occur by means of non-conscious and inactive intentional states about the function of an artifact or an artifactual kind, one acknowledges a form of continuous intentionality. An appeal to the continuous intentionality of cases involving conscious or non-conscious, active or inactive shared collective intentional states can be offered as an attempt to explain the lasting continued possession of a function by an artifact.

Social functional entities, such as the artifacts that take part in our everyday lives, are usually not conceived to be relative to the intentionality of a restricted group of individuals, but, as Husserl formulates, as being there-for-everyone¹⁰. This supports the claim that an artifact is, in most cases, the correlate of the continuous intentionality of an unrestricted group, in the sense that it may include different individuals at different times. Consider, as an illustration, the intentional state we share that the function of a knife is to cut. It is a collective intentional state. We take the function of a knife to be relative to the intentionality of a group to which we presumably belong. It is a collective intentional state of an unrestricted group, since membership to the group is open to other individuals to whom the collective intentional state may be attributed at a subsequent moment. If such cases of continuous intentionality really explain the continued possession of functions of knives and other artifacts that count as social objects, then our collective intentional states contribute to the existence of artifacts.

Some objections may be presented against the claim that continuous intentionality really explains the continued possession of functions by artifacts. One strong objection takes as absurd the consequence that an artifact would temporarily lose its function, and cease to exist for a while by losing an essential property, if it ceases to be the object of any intentional state for only a certain amount of time. A way of retorting the objection involves acknowledging that, in the absence of continuous intentionality, intentional states about the possession of a function by an artifact in the past may take part in the maintenance of its function. When we consider that some artifact has a function, e.g., that a screwdriver is to drive screws, we do not think that this concerns only its present stage, but also its former stages. We take that a screwdriver is to drive screws since its creation¹¹.

An attempt to explain the maintenance of an artifact's function by means of intentional states about its past may be seen as posing a threat to the assumption that continuous intentionality in the form suggested above explains that phenomenon. However, these tentative explanations need not be excluding. The maintenance of a function by an artifact may be explained by an appeal to a form of continuous

¹⁰ They contrast, for instance, with the unusual cases in which the knowledge of an artifactual function is a secret shared by a restricted group of people.

¹¹ The contents of the intentional states about artifacts past stages that may take part in the maintenance of their functions seem have the form "X was and still is to Y". Our ordinary experience reveals that such states are typically involved in the way we consider artifacts.

intentionality, which can involve even unconscious and inactive collective intentional states, or, in the absence of the former, by an appeal to intentional states about the artifact's past stages¹².

Alternative attempts to explain the continued possession of functions and other features of artifacts appeal to different kinds of things. In the remainder of this paper, I would like to consider views that identify the following elements as possible grounds for the continued possession of features by an artifact:

- its physical structure;
- the intentions of its maker;
- practices and conventions.

Searle explicitly denies that the physical structure of an artifact might guarantee its function in claiming that "functions are never intrinsic to the physics of a phenomenon" (Searle, 1996, p. 14). He continues this passage by asserting that "[functions] are assigned from outside by conscious observers and users", and that "[they] are never intrinsic but are always [intentionality-relative]" (Searle, 1996, p. 14). In an attempt to avoid the charge of question begging, we might emphasize the distinction between the various ways in which the physical structure of an artifact may causally interact with its surroundings, on one side, and the causal interactions that count as performances of the function that essentially characterizes the artifact, on the other. If the physical structure is the only element maintaining an artifact's function, it will be hard if not impossible to distinguish between performances of its function and other forms of physical causal interactions.

There is also a conceptual reason against the view that the physical structure of an artifact explains the maintenance of its function. Even if we are not able to offer a definition of artifact, after abandoning the common notion because of its many counterexamples, we cannot deny that artifacts depend on makers, or at least users and observers, i.e., someone that takes a material object as being of a certain kind or simply acts accordingly. The elements of makers, users or observers to which artifacts may have a dependence relation –mental states, practices, actions etc.– are external to the physical structure of artifacts and could not be exclusively physical. Even if we do not reach a proper definition of artifact, we highlight an important feature of the concept of artifact when we recognize that we would refrain from applying the terms "knife" or "artifact" to a physical duplicate of a knife that would wander in space after being produced by an asteroid shock. Since the physical structure of a physical duplicate of a knife does not guarantee the possession of the function of cutting, we conclude that the physical structure of an artifact is not sufficient for the continued possession of a function by an artifact.

A tentative explanation based on the physical structure of an artifact plus the intentions of its maker is much more appealing. Once created, the function and other features of an artifact would be maintained by its material composition and a historical element, namely, the fact that it was the successful product of its maker's intentions. However, this view is drawn from the common notion of artifact, and can be criticized by an appeal to the counterexamples mentioned in the beginning of this paper.

Another possible explanation for the continuous possession of a function by an artifact, which presents itself as a condition for its continued existence, appeals to "our practices and conventions." Lynne Rudder Baker motivates this view in *Metaphysics of Everyday Life* (2007). Similar to Searle, she acknowledges the role of intentionality in the creation of most of the things that take part of our ordinary lives, among which she includes artifacts. She refers to these entities with the term "intention-dependent phenomena", in short "ID phenomena" (Baker, 2007, p. 11). The kind of dependency that characterizes ID phenomena is initially described as a "dependency (...) on beings with intentions" (Baker, 2007, p. 12). Later in the book, she characterizes ID phenomena as the ones that "could not exist in a world without beings with propositional attitudes" (Baker, 2007, p. 52). It is not clear to me whether this represents a change in Baker's position, and, most importantly, if the set of entities that depend on beings with

¹² Things get trickier in the cases of intentional states about putative future stages of an artifact. Though we may think that some artifact will have its function until its destruction, no future stage of the artifact exists yet. In contrast, it would be highly controversial to deny that there are former or past stages of the artifact. For this reason, I do not think that our intentional states about future stages of an artifact can take part in the maintenance of its function.

intentions differs from the set of entities that depend on beings with propositional attitudes. Unfortunately, she does not discuss these matters in the book. In order to avoid these questions in presenting her views, I interpret her use of the term "ID phenomena" in accordance with only one characterization. I choose the latter, since it appears to be more comprehensive.

Besides the asserted relation of dependence, Baker does not specify the exact role that beings with propositional attitudes play for the existence of ID phenomena nor the role played by the propositional attitudes of these beings. The relation of dependence implies that beings with propositional attitudes must play a role in the creation of ID phenomena. But it remains indeterminate whether they play a significant role for *the continued existence* of ID phenomena. Baker is aware that these are distinct roles. In investigating the constitution of artifacts, she distinguishes two kinds of favorable circumstances that must take place for an aggregate of physical entities to constitute an artifact¹³. In an illustration of her views, she asks us to consider the case of a boat and asserts that there are "(1) the [favorable] circumstances in which a boat may come into existence; [and] (2) the [favorable] circumstances in which an existing boat continues to exist" (Baker, 2007, p. 53). Among the favorable circumstances for a boat to come into existence, she emphasizes the intention to build a boat by makers that know how to build a boat, as well as the satisfaction of these intentions as a result of their productive activities (Baker, 2007, p. 54). With the exception of the claim that they are less stringent than the circumstances for the creation of a boat, nothing is said about the favorable circumstances for the boat's continued existence.

In other illustrations of her views, Baker reveals that practices, conventions and even laws are to be counted among the favorable circumstances for the existence of ID phenomena. She asserts that "our practices and conventions, as well as our intentions, are what make one piece of driftwood constitute a table, and another piece of driftwood constitute a piece of art" (Baker, 2007, p. 43). In another passage, she argues that "[o]nly in circumstances with certain laws and conventions in force does a piece of plastic constitute a driver license" (Baker, 2007, p. 160). It is evident that Baker speaks in these passages not only of favorable circumstances for the creation of some ID phenomenon, but also for its continued existence. Although she does not explicitly formulate it, Baker's illustrative cases motivate the view that our practices and conventions guarantee the continued possession of functions by artifacts in general.

The question of whether practices and conventions depend on collective intentional states, or whether collective intentional states depend on practices and conventions is a matter of great dispute. In this respect, I assume a conciliatory position. On the one hand, practices and conventions are conceived as involving collective intentional states about them, which recognize their existence even if only implicitly. On the other hand, the content of intentional states is conceived to be determined to a significant extent by practices and conventions that are effective in a community in which a subject takes part. This position allows me to consider the explanation of the continued existence of artifacts that appeals to a continuous intentionality to be compatible with the claim that conventions and practices play some role in the maintenance of functions by artifacts.

The paper critically examined some notions and theses about artifacts, their creation and the maintenance of their functions. Its main result, however, consists in offering and elucidating an original thesis, namely, that the functions of artifacts that are social objects would be maintained, in part, by occurrences of continuous collective intentionality, which can involve conscious or unconscious, active or inactive collective intentional states.

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¹³ Such an aggregate becomes then the artifact's physical components.

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