

Intentionality and What We Can Learn about It from Searle's Theory of Institutions

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Abstract: Searle's theory of institutions is based on the insight that institutional facts are created in intentionality, and it consists in the logical analysis of the intentional performance in which the institutional facts are created. The aim of this paper is to relate Searle's account of intentionality as creating institutional facts to his general account of intentionality elaborated in his book *Intentionality. An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*. I come with the claim that the imposition of status function, that characterizes the intentional performance in which institutional facts are created, consists in double prescription of conditions of satisfaction, where ones of them are related to our goals and interests while the other ones are independent of them. I suggest that this holds true for intentionality in general.

Key words: conditions of satisfaction, institution, intentionality, status function.

Intentionality – a property of mental states that is to be “about something” – is one of the most mysterious phenomena. We have no idea how this phenomenon comes into being, nor do we know what exactly it consists in. How can there be processes in the world of nature – most probably some processes in the brains of animals – that are “about something”? How could it happen that the world, at one point in its history, became aware of itself? Natural processes of some special kind became “about” another natural processes, and later also about many other things – about things that neither ever existed nor ever will exist, or about things whose existence is created simply by the fact that they

are the objects of intentional states. But what is it exactly to be about something or to be intentionally related to something?

John Searle addressed this problem in his book *Intentionality. An Essay in Philosophy of Mind* (see Searle 1983). In this book, he not only analyzed the logical properties of intentional states, but also insisted on strictly distinguishing between a *logical* and an *ontological* way of talking – the misunderstanding of which is the source of much confusion in philosophy. The clarity in this matter is the key to understanding Searle's theory of intentionality – and perhaps also to understanding Searle's philosophy as such.

Searle's account laid the foundation for a general theory of intentionality describing the essential logical properties that characterize the different types of intentional states. His book represents a breakthrough in the study of intentionality in the philosophy of mind; the reader, however, will want to know more. Thanks to Searle, we know that the intentional state is characterized by intentional content that often determines the conditions of satisfaction, and that this intentional content is in a certain *psychological mode* which – in some cases – determines its *direction of fit*. But what exactly does *to have intentional content* and *to determine the conditions of satisfaction* consist of? It seems that the ability *to have the content that determines the conditions of satisfaction* is crucial for intentionality, but there is no account that works out these "properties" – neither in Searle's philosophy nor in contemporary philosophy of mind.

How is Searle's theory of institutions to help us in these questions? The theory is based on the insight that institutions and institutional facts as such are created in intentionality. They are facts only in so far as people take them to be facts in their beliefs, desires, intentions, expectations and other intentional states. Intentionality then represents a performance that creates the object that it is "about". Thus it would seem a promising endeavor to study what Searle's account of this performance says about intentionality in general.

Before we proceed to do this, we should review what Searle says about intentionality in his book on the subject. He describes four categories that characterize intentional states: *intentional content*, *psychological mode*, *direction of fit*, and *conditions of satisfaction*. The intentional content is not something that the agent would be related to, or what he or she would *use* as a "mediator" to relate to the intentional object, it is rather the state itself. In this way, every intentional state has certain in-

tentional content (see Searle 1983, 6). The intentional content is given in certain psychological mode, such as belief, desire, fear, hope, perceptual experience, etc. The psychological mode determines whether and what kind of direction of fit the intentional state has. Some intentional states – belief or perceptual experience may be examples – are supposed to match the world: they have a *mind-to-world* direction of fit. Some other states, like intentions or desire, are supposed to bring about changes in the world so that the world matches their content – they have a *world-to-mind* direction of fit (cf. Searle 1983, 8). In many types of the intentional states, the intentional content can be expressed by a proposition. Where the intentional content is propositional and the state has a direction of fit, the intentional content determines its *conditions of satisfaction*. Conditions of satisfaction are those conditions which must be obtained if the state is to be satisfied (see Searle 1983, 12-13).

Every intentional state has an intentional content in a certain psychological mode. In some intentional states – actually in the most important types of them such as intentions, perceptual experiences, beliefs, desires – the intentional content determines the conditions of satisfaction of that state, and the psychological mode determines its direction of fit. It seems to me that we could see these four notions that characterize intentionality as actually being just two notions: (1) the intentional content that takes the form of the conditions of satisfaction for some states, and (2) the psychological mode that, for some states, determines the direction of fit.

At least two more things should be said about the conditions of satisfaction: they are always represented under some aspects and, in some intentional states (perceptual experiences and intentions in action are basic examples of them), they have a *self-referentiality* (a prescription of a causal relation) incorporated in them.

This account of intentionality, according to Searle, says nothing about the *ontology* of intentional states; it instead addresses their *logical* properties.

If the question ‘What is a belief really?’ is taken to mean: what is a belief *qua* belief?, then the answer has to be given, at least in part, in terms of the logical properties of belief: a belief is a propositional content in a certain psychological mode, its mode determines a mind-to-world direction of fit, and its propositional content determines a set of conditions of satisfaction. Intentional states have to be characterized in Intentional terms if we are not to lose sight of their

intrinsic Intentionality. But if the question is 'What is the mode of existence of beliefs and other Intentional states?' then from everything we currently know about how the world works the answer is: Intentional states are both caused by and realized in the structure of the brain. (Searle 1983, 15)

Keeping this in mind will help us to not make any of the common philosophical mistakes and confusions: the intentional contents are not "mysterious entities", it is the way in which we characterize the intentional states if we are concerned with their intentionality. Neither are they images in our heads, nor do they contain some sense data. The contents are prescriptions of the conditions of satisfaction that are satisfied by the intentional objects but they don't have the properties that they ascribe to the objects – e.g. the visual experience of yellow is not yellow.

The *intentional content* or the *conditions of satisfaction* is a name for a logical property whereas the *intentional object* names an ordinary object: "an Intentional object is just an object like any other; it has no peculiar ontological status at all" (Searle 1983, 16).

There are some other important features about intentional states. For example, the necessity for the intentional states to be a part of a *Network* of other intentional states and to stand against a *Background* of practices and preintentional assumptions (cf. Searle 1983, 19-21).

We can summarize: In order for a state to be intentional, it has to have an intentional content with which it relates to its object; the manner of this relation being determined by the psychological mode of the state. In the cases of the intentional states that can be called *paradigmatic*, like beliefs, desires, perceptual experiences and intentions in action, the relation of the state to its object can be characterized as a "fit", in which the responsibility for that fit can rest either on the intentional state (mind-to-world direction of fit), or on the world (world-to-mind direction of fit). In these cases, the intentional contents determine their conditions of satisfaction. As a result of having all these properties, the state can have its intentional object, or it can be *of* or *about* an object (providing the conditions of satisfaction are satisfied). In the paradigmatic cases, the intentional object is a real object in the world, or, more precisely, it is a state of affairs in the world (which is reflected in the propositional form of their intentional content).

It is the ability to have a content that prescribes conditions of satisfaction with a certain direction of fit that is the defining mark of inten-

tionality. It could seem from Searle's account that the content alone is not enough for a definition of intentionality, and that a psychological mode has to be added in order that the state is intentional. But the function of the psychological mode is to determine the direction of fit, and the direction of fit is part of the conditions of satisfaction prescribed by the content – quite similarly as self-referentiality is a part of the conditions of satisfaction in the case of the perceptual experience or the intention in action.

If intentionality is defined as an ability to have a content that prescribes conditions of satisfaction with a certain direction of fit, we might then want to know more about the content. What is its structure or composition? What exactly does it consist of to have this kind of content?

There should be something in the intentional content that reflects the ability to prescribe the conditions of satisfaction and to have the direction of fit. We should be able to see what makes the content be a prescription of the conditions of satisfaction with certain direction of fit. Further, there should be something in the intentional content that reflects the logical relations and connections between the types of intentional states. There are at least two kind of relations between intentional states: first, the systematic ones, as every intentional state has to be a part of a network of intentional states – a belief has to be related to other beliefs, intentions, perceptions, etc. Secondly, there are some “hierarchical” relations to be found: some intentional states are more primordial or primary than others, e.g., the perceptual experiences and intentions in action are, as Searle says, “biologically primary forms of intentionality” because they have intentional causation in their conditions of satisfaction, and beliefs and desires appear to be rather “etioloated forms of more primordial experiences in perceiving and doing” from which the intentional causation has been “bleached out” (Searle 1983, 36). Furthermore, the perceptual experiences and the intentions in action are also primary to memories and prior intentions which also involve some kind of intentional causation but presuppose perceptions and intentional actions and build on them. The primacy is not only “biological”, but also logical. A further analysis of the intentional content should shed light on all these logical relations.

At this point, it is necessary to clarify what kind of analysis we are calling for. Searle denies that the analysis of the *formal* structure of intentional states is a relevant method for the investigation of intentional

states *qua* intentional. Intentionality is defined by the content, not by some formal structure, as artificial intelligence and cognitive psychology often assume (see Searle 1983, 12). We cannot investigate semantics through the investigation of syntax. This opinion of Searle's is something that we agree with. If we call for further analysis of the intentional content, and perhaps for an exposition of its general "structure", we have in mind the investigation of the structural elements of the *content*, not of the syntax or some other formal structure. The generality here does not imply formality.

Searle emphasizes that the intentional content always determines the conditions of satisfaction *under certain aspects*. The aspectual character implies the first person perspective that should be taken into account if we want to investigate the intentional content. But the first person perspective is a concept that is philosophically ambiguous: for many philosophers, it implies something like a "private character" of the content, a kind of epistemic privacy in the sense that Wittgenstein was worried about. However, this implication is by no means necessary. While it is true that the agent always experiences the world from his or her point of view and that other people experience the same world from their point of view, it doesn't follow that the perspectival mode of experience is essentially private or incommunicable. And if we want to investigate the intentional content *qua intentional*, we have to respect its aspectual, and therefore also first-personal character. We seek to describe the general features of the content, which is to say we seek to find some general features in what the agent "comprehends" when she lives in the flux of her conscious intentional life. In order to do it, we don't need to get into her "epistemically private zone" (and to ponder whether and how it is possible). All that we need to do is to keep a clear understanding of which properties are relevant to our investigation and which are not relevant.

I have mentioned the *conscious* form of the intentional states. But isn't this a complication of the investigation? So far, we have been dealing with intentional states and there is no necessity for those states to be conscious – we have, for example, many beliefs that have never been brought to consciousness. I would like to say that the notion of consciousness seems to be implied by the first-personal perspective as such. How else would the intentional states acquire their first-personal character if not through the fact that they can be, at least potentially, conscious? Also, as Searle says in his book *The Rediscovery of the Mind*:

“we do not have a clear notion of unconscious mental states. ... *The notion of an unconscious mental state implies accessibility to consciousness.* We have no notion of the unconscious except as that which is potentially conscious” (Searle 1992, 152).

Let’s us now proceed to explore what Searle says about the intentional content, the conditions of satisfaction and the direction of fit in his account of social and institutional reality. It is true that, explicitly at least, he doesn’t say anything about them. However, his account of social and institutional reality is essentially based on his investigation of intentionality. Institutional reality comes to existence in the performance of intentionality by a human community and it continues to exist only as far as the intentionality maintains it in existence. This is the basic insight that determines Searle’s point of departure. In the beginning of his book *The Construction of Social Reality* Searle writes:

...there are portions of the real world, objective facts in the world, that are only facts by human agreement. In a sense there are things that exist only because we believe them to exist. (Searle 1995, 1)

Searle calls these facts *institutional facts* and as examples of them he states:

I am thinking of such facts as that I am a citizen of United States, that the piece of paper in my pocket is a five dollar bill, that my younger sister got married on December 14, that I own a piece of property in Berkeley, and that the New York Giants won the 1991 superbowl. (Searle 1995, 1)

Institutional facts contrast with brute facts, such as „that Mount Everest has snow and ice near the summit or that hydrogen atoms have one electron, which are facts totally independent of any human opinions“ (Searle 1995, 1-2).

Institutional facts differ from brute facts in their ontology: the existence of the former depends on intentionality, the latter exist independently of intentionality. And as institutional facts exist because people *believe* that they exist, *accept* that they exist, *recognize* that they exist, *expect* them to exist, *act* towards their existence, etc., it is natural that to investigate the ontology of institutional facts amounts to an investigation of those beliefs, acceptations, recognitions, expectations, actions, etc., which is to say that we have to investigate those intentional states in relation to which the institutional facts stand as their intentional objects.

In *Intentionality*, Searle emphasizes that intentional objects are just ordinary objects without there being anything special or even mysterious about their ontology. They are often the objects that exist independently of mind and the ontology of which can be described by physics, chemistry and other natural sciences. The ontology of institutional facts, however, *is* peculiar in a certain sense: they exist only as far as they are objects of intentional states. In other words: they exist only as far as they satisfy the conditions of satisfaction prescribed by the intentional states. How can they do it? How can they satisfy those conditions of satisfaction? They satisfy the conditions of satisfaction because people *think* (believe, recognize, accept, remember, etc.) that they satisfy the conditions of satisfaction. So it seems that intentionality not only prescribes the conditions of satisfaction, but is also able to “hold” the object as satisfying the conditions of satisfaction where the object itself would not satisfy them otherwise.

Searle’s definition of the performance that creates and maintains institutional reality (from *The Construction of Social Reality*) goes as follows: institutional facts exist because we *collectively impose status functions to objects*. This existence-giving performance has three essential elements: the *imposition of function*, the *status* character of the imposed function, and the *collective* character of the imposition.

The imposition of function is, according to Searle, a common performance of intentionality and it is part of our everyday experience of the world: we normally experience the objects in the world as having some functions, and the functions are relative to our practical goals and interests.

... we do not experience things *as* material objects, much less as collections of molecules. Rather, we experience a world of chairs and tables, houses and cars, lecture halls, pictures, streets, gardens, houses, and so forth. (Searle 1995, 14)

If the imposition of function is a performance of intentionality, how is it related to the accounts from the book *Intentionality*? At first sight it resembles the prescription of the conditions of satisfaction, and I think it is the prescription of the conditions of satisfaction although not in the superficial sense of saying that the object satisfies the conditions of satisfactions if it satisfies the imposed function. To prescribe the conditions of satisfaction is to determine under which aspects we experience the object. Hence we can say that the conditions of satisfaction (or more

precisely: one part of them) say: “something that I can sit on”, “something that can take me from the place A to the place B”, “something that I can keep water in”, etc.

In the case of institutional facts, the imposed function is a *status* function. “Status function” is the title for a function that the object cannot satisfy in virtue of its natural (i.e. physical, chemical, biological, etc.) properties. While there are natural objects that can satisfy functions such as “something that can take me to the other bank of the river” regardless what (and whether) anybody accepts this satisfaction, there are no natural objects able, solely in virtue of their physical properties, to satisfy functions like “something that I can pay with” or “something that will entitle me to enter the concert hall on the concert night”. The objects that in fact satisfy the functions of the latter type (i.e. money or concert tickets from our examples above) does so because a community *accepts* that they satisfy those functions. Functions of the latter type are called *status functions* by Searle, functions of the former type are called *causal functions* (or more precisely: agentive causal functions).

From the reflections above, it seems to be obvious that the intentional performance of the imposition of status function has two parts: first, the imposition of a function relative to our practical goals and interests, and second, the acceptance of an object as satisfying the imposed function. While it is just one single performance if seen from the third person point of view, there are two different intentional states from the first-personal perspective. The difference between those two states, however, is not that one of them prescribes the conditions of satisfaction and the other does something else – perhaps picks out the object directly, without any mediator: every intentional state that has a relation to reality (i.e. that has direction of fit) involves the conditions of satisfaction. What we find here are rather two different kinds of conditions of satisfaction. We have said about one of them that it prescribes the conditions of satisfaction relative to the practical goals and interests of the agent. What can we say about the other? It picks out the same object through different conditions of satisfaction, through conditions that are independent of all goals and interest of the first ones – for example through its appearance, i.e. through its shape, size, color, stiffness, etc. Then we say that you can pay with a piece of paper of such and such a shape, colors, print, size etc. Or we can pick out the object through its material, or also through its origin: you can pay with objects made of some specific material or issued in some specific way. The object can

also be identified through another function, causal or status one, and then we have an iteration of the imposition of function. All these ways are represented by the aspects of the intentional content.

Then we can say that the institutional fact is constructed in an act of identification: the thing that *has such and such properties* is identical with the thing *that allows me to do such and such*. The institutional facts have a special ontology because they are constructed as intentional objects of mental acts of some community. It seems that we can conclude that it is constructed in the performance of (at least) two intentional states of different kind: one of them is cognitive, the other one is volitive. The institutional fact is constructed as their common product.

Now we can ask: is something similar true about the intentionality that is “about” things that exist independently of it? Since the ability to impose status functions has been developed from the intentionality of a lower or more primitive level, we can suppose that the answer is “yes”. Most probably, we relate to the natural objects in two different ways as well: through a function relative to our goals and interests (it must be a *causal* function in this case), and through their properties that we can perceive through our senses. Perhaps this is the essential condition under which a state can be intentional at all: to represent *the same* object in two different ways, and to do it in such a manner that it is exactly the interconnection of those two representations (i.e. the conditions of satisfaction) that presents the object as identical.

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