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On the intentionality-relative features of the world

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ABSTRACT

Many things we deal with in our daily lives seem to be products of our mental, intentional states. John Searle (1996, 2010) defended this thesis, and offered a characterization of the "intentionality-relative features of the world". The present paper aims at contributing to our understanding of the nature of such entities. It presents and criticises Searle's claims on the general properties of the intentionality-relative features of the world. An original characterization is offered in the paper, as a consequence of modifications I suggest making to Searle's account, mainly in respect to the epistemological status of such entities.

Keywords: intentionality, intentionality-relative features of the world, ontological subjectivity, epistemological objectivity.

As an introductory remark about his views concerning what is social, John Searle claims in *The Construction of the Social Reality* that social entities are among the "portions of the real world [...] that exist only because we believe them to exist" (1996, p. 1). In *Making the Social World* (2010), Searle does not place the condition for the existence of such entities specifically on beliefs. Social entities are said to be intentionality-relative features of the world (henceforth, IRs). Notwithstanding its rather recent occurrence, the term appropriately represents Searle's earlier views. Searle (2010) suggests the term 'intentionality-relative features of the world' as a substitute for 'observer-relative features of the world,' which was largely employed in his former book. The present paper investigates the notion of intentionality-relative features of the world. Its aim is to reveal general aspects of IRs that distinguish them from brute, natural features of the world. The paper proceeds, first, by considering claims made by Searle about IRs. Afterwards, it offers a criticism of these claims, and suggests modifications when they seem problematic.

Social entities, artefacts, and actions, among other things, seem to depend on mental, intentional states, in the sense that if the latter did not exist, neither could the former. Common sense also teaches that such intentionality-relative entities exist, or in other words, that they are features of the world. Contrary to common sense, however, philosophers may hold an eliminativist view with regard to intentionality-relative entities. It is not my intention here to criticize this view. I take here for granted that at least some intentionality-relative entities exist, and attempt to characterize their nature.

A reflection on the meaning of the terms that compose the expression "intentionality-relative features of the world" is an appropriate starting point for the present investigation. "Intentionality" is a philosophical term of art. According to a fairly unproblematic characterization, intentionality is a property that some entities have in virtue of being about something. My current

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belief that it is raining is intentional, because it is about a particular state of affairs. Traffic lights are intentional, because they are about the actions that drivers have to undertake when they are in front of them. IRs are conceived as embracing things that are real, since they are referred to as "features of the world." The term "intentionality-relative" indicates an aspect by means of which IRs differ from mere intentional objects. Although the rain of which my belief is about is an intentional object, it is not relative to or dependent on intentionality. On the other hand, IRs are explicitly characterized as being dependent on or relative to intentional entities.

In *The Construction of Social Reality*, Searle offers both a negative and a positive characterization of IRs. The negative characterization consists in the distinction he draws between IRs and "those features we might call intrinsic to nature" (Searle, 1996, p. 9). The intrinsic features of the world cover things of two different kinds. On the one hand, they include things that are ontologically objective, i.e., things whose mode of existence is "independent of any perceiver or any mental state" (Searle, 1996, p. 8). On the other hand, they include mental states (Searle, 1996, p. 10f.), which are ontologically subjective, in the sense that "their mode of existence depends on [...] subjects" (Searle, 1996, p. 8). As an illustration: both my belief that it is snowing and the snow itself are said to be intrinsic features of the world.

One might consider the negative characterization to be circular. Besides the fact that they are not intentionality-relative, there does not seem to be an interesting common aspect that mental states share with ontologically objective things. Searle seems to rely on their independency from intentionality (which differs from the kind of independency that characterizes the ontologically objective) to distinguish intrinsic features of the world from IRs. The resulting negative characterization of IRs as things that differ from things that are not intentionality-relative is, indeed, circular. However, it turns out to be informative if we consider the kinds of things that are said to be independent from intentionality. According to this negative characterization, intentionality-relative features of the world are neither ontologically objective things nor mental states. In order to avoid a form of question-begging against physicalist or psychologist theories of IRs, I argue for a more modest approach, which says that IRs do not seem to be physical or mental.

IRs do not seem to be physical in the strict sense of the term because, first, they are not the subject of physical theories, and, second, there are pragmatic and historical reasons to keep them out of the scope of physics in times to come. IRs do not seem to be physical in a derivative sense because the claim that they are realized by the physical is a matter of controversy. None of these reasons, however, justifies the peremptory claim that intentionality-relative features of the world are not physical. If one of the metaphysical theses of physicalism is correct, then IRs are physical in some sense.

The claim that IRs are not mental states is supported by evidence that mental states are not necessarily intentionality-relative. Although conscious states might consist in a mental state being the object of another (intentional) mental state, as suggested by the higher-order monitoring theories of consciousness, this is not a condition for something to be a mental state in the first place. Another reason for distinguishing IRs from the mental is that they do not necessarily manifest the properties traditionally attributed to mental states. According to Searle, mental states have the distinctive properties of possessing phenomenal quality and/or being intentional, i.e., being about something (Searle, 1996, p. 7). Although some IRs might be said to posses phenomenal quality—one might insist that there is some particular phenomenal state that is what is like to be the president of the United States—or intentionality, in the case of linguistic tokens, some IRs do not seem to have any of these properties. There is no phenomenal state that is what is like to be a hammer, and it also lacks intentionality, in the sense that it is not about something else. Despite these differences, however, if IRs are reducible to mental states or events, then they are mental states in some sense.

In *The Construction of Social Reality*, we find a positive characterization of observer-relative features of the world, which we might take to characterize IRs as follows:

(i) IRs are ontologically subjective (p. 10);
(ii) "some [...] are epistemically objective" (p. 10);
(iii) they "exist relative to the intentionality of observers, users, etc" (p. 9).

Let us consider the steps of this positive characterization of IRs and the reasons for acknowledging or rejecting them.

The characterization presented in (i) is unproblematic. As stated above, Searle conceives the category of the ontologically subjective as comprehending things whose mode of existence depends on subjects. Mental states are paradigmatic examples of ontologically subjective entities. Conscious or phenomenal states, such as tokens of pain, are ontologically subjective, "because their mode of existence depends on being felt by subjects" (Searle, 1996, p. 8). A similar claim is evident in respect to intentional mental states. They could not occur without a subject to entertain them.

The category of the ontologically subjective is not restricted to mental states. By definition, the existence of IRs depends on intentional entities, which are either mental states or other IRs, such as symbolic and linguistic tokens. The IRs that are themselves intentional entities depend, ultimately, on mental states that impose on them the function of "representing" or "standing for" other things (Searle, 1996, p. 21). Given the transitivity of dependence, IRs are ontologically subjective.

In contrast to (i), the remarks made in (ii) and (iii) are problematic to a certain extent. I begin with an analysis of the third attributed aspect, since its results justify the use of the term "intentionality-relative feature of the world," instead of Searle's original term, "observer-relative features of the world".

In *Making the Social World*, Searle acknowledges that the expression "observer-relative features of the world" can be misleading, and introduces the alternative term. In his words:

> *[The expression] seems to imply that it is outside observers, adopting the anthropological standpoint, who assign observer-relative statuses to peoples and objects. But that is not my intention at all. […] So instead of saying 'observer-relative' I am going to use the expression 'intentionality relative'. What I want to convey is that people's attitudes are necessary to constitute something as money, government, political parties, or final examinations (2010, p. 17).*

Like the term "observer-relative," the characterization of IRs presented in (iii) is compatible with the view that observation plays a necessary and sufficient role in the constitution of IRs. Moreover, the possibility of conceiving IRs as being constituted by outside observers is not the only possible misunderstanding that might arise from (iii). It is also possible to interpret the sentence "IRs exist relative to the intentionality of observers, users, etc." as asserting that subjects must be somehow interacting with the entities in question, i.e., by observing them or using them.

The two possible ways of misunderstanding the notion of intentionality-relative features of the world are avoided if intentional states are conceived as being distinct from conscious episodes. A careful reading of Searle's position supports this view. Searle argues that instances of intentional states can extend over the period of time in which the subject has no consciousness of them (1996, p. 7). Accordingly, my belief that knights move in L-shapes in chess persists even when I do not consciously entertain this thought. The characterization of intentional states as "people's attitudes" in the passage quoted above also indicates that they are distinct from conscious episodes. Accordingly, I argue that, instead of (iii), the dependency of IRs with respect to intentional states is more appropriately represented in the following claim:

> (iii)* IRs are relative to intentional states of subjects, which persist even when subjects are not conscious of them.

Step (ii) of the positive characterization presented above asserts that some IRs are epistemically objective. This statement might suggest that some IRs are not epistemically objective, but, by exclusion, epistemically subjective. We should ask in what sense some IRs are said to be epistemically objective and others epistemically subjective.

Searle claims that the predicates "epistemically objective" and "epistemically subjective" apply primarily to judgments and, derivatively, to facts. He distinguishes epistemologically objective judgments from epistemologically subjective judgments by means of the role that opinions might play in determining their truth-value. The term "opinion" stands for "attitudes, feelings and points of view" (Searle, 1996, p. 8). According to Searle's distinction, if the truth-value of a judgment can be ascertained independently of any opinion, then the judgment is epistemically objective. If the truth-value of a judgment is a matter of opinion, then it is epistemically subjective. "Socrates is ugly" and "Hippias is beautiful" would, thus, be examples of epistemically subjective judgments; "the earth moves around the sun," an example of an epistemically objective judgment.

The predicates "epistemically objective" and "epistemically subjective" apply to facts in accordance with the kind of judgment whose truth-value is determined by the fact in question. According to this classification, a fact is epistemically objective if it determines the truth-value of an epistemically objective judgment. It is epistemically subjective if it determines the truth-value of an epistemically subjective judgment.

The statement "some intentionality-relative features of the world are epistemically subjective" cannot be interpreted as stating that IRs make epistemically subjective judgments true. Consider some examples of judgments about IRs to illustrate this point. "The present paper is about IRs" is an epistemically objective judgment about an intentionality-relative feature of the world, namely, the present paper. It is made true by the paper itself. Thus, the present paper is said to be epistemically objective. In contrast, the judgment "the present paper is interesting" is epistemically subjective, since its truth-value is determined by the "attitudes, feelings and points of view" of the author and the readers. The role played by opinions in determining the truth-value of an epistemically subjective judgment does not imply that such opinions are the only things upon which the truth of the judgment depends. If the present paper did not exist, then the statement that it is interesting would be false. However, the existence of the present paper does not determine the truth of the judgment in question.

We have seen that, according to Searle, the predicate "epistemically subjective" applies to judgments of a certain class, as well as to the "attitudes, feelings and points of view" that determine the truth-value of those judgments. If some IRs are epistemically subjective, then these must be either epistemically subjective judgments or the mental states that determine the truth-value of these judgments. As a consequence of Searle's negative characterization, according to which IRs are not mental states, the claim that some IRs are epistemically subjective must be understood as stating that some IRs are epistemically subjective judgments. In contrast, epistemically objective IRs can be either epistemically objective judgments or the facts that make these judgments true.

There is another way of interpreting the distinction between what is epistemically subjective and what is epistemically objective. I take this alternative distinction to be much more appealing than the one presented by Searle, since it is informative about the distinct ways in which our own mental states and external features of the world can be known.

Instead of applying only to judgments whose truth-value depends on opinions, the predicate "epistemically subjective" can be understood as applying to what is accessible, or can be known in a way that is peculiarly related to each individual subject. Our own mental states are said to be accessible to us in this peculiar way. Davidson, for instance, asserts that:

> *We know in a way no one else can what we believe, fear, want, value, and intend. We know how things seem to us, how they look to us, feel to us, smell and sound to us to be. We know these things in a way that we can never know about the world around us (2001c [1990], p. 193).*

According to Davidson, the knowledge that individual subjects have of their own mental states is peculiarly related to them in many respects. Most importantly for the categorical distinction I wish to stress, Davidson argues that this knowledge is obtained in an unmediated, direct way.

The unmediated, direct access to our own mental states seems to grant us an authority concerning our knowledge of them. This first-person authority consists in the fact that a person is *normally* right about her beliefs concerning her own mental states. Davidson acknowledges that this kind of knowledge is not *always* indubitable and correct (Davidson, 2001a [1984], p. 4). Someone might be mistaken about one or another mental state she thinks she has. However, as Davidson argues, error and uncertainty "arises only rarely in the cases of beliefs about our own states of mind" (Davidson, 2001d [1991], p. 205). Given that it is rare, the possibility of mistake does not threaten the authority a person has concerning the knowledge of her own mental states (Davidson, 2001b [1987], p. 15).

According to Davidson, first-person authority is justified by the fact that a person knows how she understands the elements (concepts or words) that constitute her mental states. A second person would have to interpret, based on utterances and other kinds of overt behaviour, how the first person understands these elements. Cases of utterances reveal a clear distinction between the two ways of access to the contents of one's mind. A hearer needs to interpret the concepts or the meaning that the speaker assigns to his words. In contrast, Davidson argues, a speaker "cannot, in the same way, interpret his own words" (Davidson, 2001a [1984], p. 12; see also Davidson, 2001b [1987], p. 37).

The knowledge we have about the external world, like the knowledge we have about other minds, seems to be mediated by evidence and, thus, indirect. The mediated nature of this knowledge implies a lack of authority over it, in the sense that "each of our beliefs about the world, taken alone, may be false" (Davidson, 2001c [1990], p. 194). In contrast to knowledge of our own mental states, individual beliefs about the world can be false because of a lack of evidence, false conclusions based on the evidence we have, etc.

Instead of employing the predicate "epistemically objective" in the way suggested by Searle, I take it to be more fruitful to use it to distinguish what we can only know about in a mediated, indirect way. Physical and natural entities in general are paradigmatic examples of things that deserve the predicate "epistemically objective" in this sense. Our knowledge concerning the nature of physical entities (such as natural satellites or radioactivity) and about their occurrences (expressed in "there is just one natural satellite orbiting the earth" and "that sample is radioactive") can only be obtained if we interpret evidence. This constraint applies not only to cases in which such knowledge is obtained by means of individual experience or experimentation, but also to cases in which it is obtained strictly by means of a reliable communication. When an expert tells us, after taking the appropriate measurements, that some sample is radioactive, we have to interpret her words in order to know that fact.

Natural entities are not the only things we normally consider to inhabit the external world. Intentionality-relative features of world, people, and maybe some other things are also expected to be out there. The question of whether they all should be considered epistemically objective is an interesting one. With respect to the intentionality-relative features of the world, it can be argued that some of us have a certain authority concerning the knowledge of their nature.

By means of reflection, we are able to recognize that a significant number of IRs are not simply relative to intentional states, but are also conceived as the intended products of some productive activity. I refer to these as intended IRs, and distinguish them from those that are unintended or by-products. Artefacts, such as a knife and a table, and institutional entities, such as a reading group, are good examples of the former kind. Recession and pollution are good examples of the latter.

The recognition that some IRs are the intended products of those who actively constitute or produce them may be thought to justify the claim that some people have a privileged epistemic position concerning their nature. Thomasson (2003, 2007) argues in favour of this position with respect to both artefacts and institutional entities. According to her, those who constitute these entities intend them to instantiate a certain group of properties, and the success of their productive activity is measured by the degree to which these properties are imposed on the product.

An artefact is generally conceived as the product of its maker's intention, an intention directed towards the production of an item of that very kind.[2] Thomasson distinguishes two possible ways of interpreting the requirement of a maker's intention to produce an artefact of a determinate kind (Thomasson, 2003, p. 595). On one reading, the maker does not need to know the features that specify the kind in question, but is acquainted with the kind by means of a sample of its extension. In this case, the maker intends "merely to make something of 'the same type as these'" (Thomasson, 2003, p. 595). On another reading, the maker must know the features that specify the nature of a certain artefactual kind and, in accordance with this knowledge, she may try to impose those features on the artefact. Thomasson says

[2] Thomasson (2007, p. 53) presents this as a conceptual truth.

that the first reading demands from the maker only a transparent understanding of the artefactual kind, while the second demands an opaque understanding. Accordingly, I call the different interpretations "the transparent reading" and "opaque reading".

Thomasson presents two problems with the transparent reading of the requirement for the maker to intend to produce an artefact of a determinate kind. First, the requirement that the maker be acquainted with a sample of the kind's extension leaves prototypes out of the picture (Thomasson, 2003, p. 595). A prototype, i.e., the first instantiation of a certain artefactual kind, cannot be produced with the intention to resemble other instantiations of that kind. Second, if the maker does not know the specific features of the artefactual kind, she might fail to produce an artefact of this kind (Thomasson, 2003, p. 596). The maker might produce something similar to artefacts of a certain kind, but which would not be recognized as belonging to this kind by anyone else.

The opaque reading of the requirement for the maker to intend to produce an artefact of a certain kind is manifested in Risto Hilpinen's characterization of the notion of artefact. He presents his position as follows:

> *I take an object to be an artifact in the strict sense of the word only if it is intentionally produced by an agent under some description of the object. The intention "ties" to the object a number of descriptions (concepts or predicates); such descriptions define its intended properties. The object's existence, as well as some of its properties, are causally dependent on the intention (Hilpinen, 1992, p. 60f.).*

The last sentence of the quoted passage, which asserts a causal dependency of the object upon the maker's intention, is compatible with both readings distinguished by Thomasson. However, the claim that the maker's intention associates with the intended product "a number of descriptions (concepts or predicates)", which define the properties of the latter, makes Hilpinen's characterization a clear example of the opaque reading. This view is reinforced by Hilpinen's claim that some of the properties of an artefact are counterfactually dependent on the descriptions of properties that figure as contents of the maker's intention (Hilpinen, 1992, p. 64f.).

Thomasson argues for a similar characterization of the relation between an artefact and the content of the intention of its maker. According to her, an object belongs to an artefactual kind only if it is the product of a largely successful intention of the maker to produce an object that exemplifies her substantive concept of that artefactual kind (Thomasson, 2003, p. 599f.). In other words, something is an artefact if it has, to a significant extent, properties corresponding to the maker's substantive concept of the respective artefactual kind. Based on this dependency relation, Thomasson concludes that makers have a "privileged epistemic position" about the nature of the artefacts they produce (Thomasson, 2003, p. 602), which she also describes as "some incorrigible first-order knowledge" (Thomasson, 2003, p. 603).

Thomasson's argument to the conclusion that some people might have a privileged epistemic position concerning the nature of institutional entities is based on a particular view about their constitution. In a general sense, this view says that a group of people constitutes an institutional entity by determining through collective acceptance the sufficient conditions for something to be an instantiation of the institution's kind. In other words, they determine the features that make an institutional entity or kind what it is. Thomasson concludes that, since those who constitute an institutional entity determine the features that make it what it is, they have a privileged epistemic position with respect to the nature of the constituted entity (Thomasson, 2003, p. 589f.). In order to illustrate Thomasson's position, consider the case of a reading group. A reading group is established when two or more people agree to meet regularly to discuss texts they will read beforehand. The founders/members of the reading group determine when they will meet, the texts that are going to be discussed, etc. The features that are determined in this way compose the nature of the group, together with the notion of a group of people getting together regularly to discuss some texts. According to Thomasson's position, each founder/member of a reading group knows the features that characterize the nature of the reading group in a privileged way. They do not need to investigate or consider evidence to know if the group will continue to exist in the forthcoming semester. They simply agree about it.

Thomasson's arguments are compelling. In my opinion, they effectively lead us to the conclusion that those who constitute or produce intended IRs have a "privileged epistemic position" with regard to their nature. However, I do not think this privileged position justifies the claim that the nature of these IRs can be known independently of any investigation and interpretation of evidence. In the following, I argue that the intended intentionality-relative features of the world are also epistemically objective.

A maker and a person who takes part in the constitution of institutional entities know the features they try to impose on the products of their activities. They know them because these features are part of the content of their intention. However, this knowledge does not imply that they know the features (or the nature) of the product of their activities. One strong reason in support of this claim is that such creative activities may fail at some point. It is evident that someone's intention is not sufficient for producing an artefact or constituting an institutional entity. Other conditions must also be met, and if these are not satisfied, then the artifact or the institutional entity might lack some of the intended features, or might not even exist. An artefact-maker may fail to obtain an intended product for different reasons, which extend from the use of bad materials or the incorrect employment of a technique to unfavourable environmental conditions. A person who wants to start a reading group may be persuaded that she has established one, even though the other putative

members of the group have lied to her about their participation and secretly decided never to meet.

In order to know the nature of an artefact or an institutional entity, those who have made or constitute them need evidence that their intentions have been successful, i.e., that the intended IRs have the features that they tried to impose to them. Without evidence of this kind, an artefact maker cannot justify her belief concerning the features of the product of her activities; and the same applies to a person who takes part in the constitution of an institutional entity. Evidence of a successful production or constitution might be obtained during or after the process aimed at realizing the intentions. In some cases, those who produce or constitute entities do not need any further investigation to justify their knowledge about the nature of the products of their creative activities. The process might be such that enough evidence is obtained by anyone who employs it. However, even in these cases, the maker's knowledge of the features of an artefact or an institutional entity is based on evidence she has had to interpret.

Makers can be said to hold a privileged epistemic position with regard to the nature of the IRs they produce because they determine the features that these IRs are expected to have. In investigating these things, they would not make substantive discoveries with regard to their nature, but only verify the presence of the expected features. However, the privileged epistemic position enjoyed by makers does not imply knowledge of the nature of the intended IRs. As argued above, such knowledge depends on evidence that reveals the success of the production or constitution.

The dependence of knowledge concerning intended IRs on evidence justifies the claim that intended IRs are epistemically objective, i.e., that they can only be known in an indirect, mediated way. There should be no doubt that the same position applies to what I referred above as unintended IRs. Our knowledge about their nature and instantiation is not facilitated by any privileged epistemic position. Therefore, I argue that, similarly to natural entities, all intentionality-relative features of the world are epistemically objective.

By considering IRs in accordance with Searle's categories of the epistemically subjective and the epistemically objective, we conclude that (ii) some IRs are epistemically objective. The predicate "epistemically objective" applies, in this sense, to judgments whose truth-value is independent from opinions and the facts that determine the truth-value of these judgments. The distinction inspired by Davidson supports a more categorical statement about IRs. It allows us to assert that all IRs are epistemically objective, in the sense that they can only be known by means of external evidence. Since this characterization is more elucidative about the nature of IRs in general, I replace the item (ii) that corresponds to Searle's positive characterization of IRs with:

> (ii)* All intentionality-relative features of the world are epistemically objective, in the sense that they can only be known by means of external evidence.

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