

Abstract

Neither the designer's intentions or the user's decisions suffice to account for the functions of artifacts. Since intentionalist theories have failed, attempts have been made to explain artifact function in the same way as philosophers of biology have accounted for the functions of organisms: either through causal role / system theories (e. g. Robert Cummins) or through etiological / selected effects theories (e. g. Ruth Garrett Millikan). However, the analogy between organisms and artifacts is less than convincing. In the present paper, artifact function is related to a form of life as a containing system. The elements of such a system can satisfy different functions by virtue of intrinsic physical properties as well as by symbolic properties. If the use of an artifact infringes upon the total benefits of the system, we speak of malfunction or misuse, as opposed to proper function. With regard to artifacts, the notion of function makes sense but, as John Searle has pointed out, it can only be seen as a misuse of language if applied to mind-independent objects.