

A New Essence of Artifacts

Abstract. Traditionally, among those authors who hold that artifacts are as ontologically respectable as are natural kinds, artifacts have been thought to have an essence, which determines membership in each artifactual kind. Two main views are the most shared on the subject—artifacts’ essence is either given by their function(s) or by their makers’ intention(s). According to the former view, the so-called *functionalist accounts*, the sameness of function(s) is the most relevant criterion of kind membership.¹ The essence of artifacts is represented by the function(s) that the members of the relevant kind perform. Artifact functions can be interpreted essentially in different ways: as proper functions, as intended functions, as actual functions, as causal functions, or as a combination of these properties. According to the so-called *intentionalist accounts*, artifacts are defined instead by intentions (of the designer, producer, user, community, making something that belongs to a certain kind, etc.). What makes a certain artifact a member of its kind are the basic intentions of creating something of that relevant kind.² Yet, it has been pointed out that all of the proposed accounts run into problems. It seems that none of the suggested candidates succeeds in actually constituting the nature of artifactual kinds, for there are artifacts that those candidates are not able to individuate and categorize. With this talk, I aim to argue that a further candidate for the functionalist accounts can be considered: what I define as *function**. Artifacts’ essence is constituted by their function(s) but intended as dispositional properties. The function of an artifact individuates its kind membership; yet, were it not capable of performing that function, it would keep the aptitude to do so. This candidate – I will show – bypasses all the problems of which the other accounts have been accused and brings about several advantages. Among others, there is the advantage of including under the same class: e.g., artifacts intended not to function, as are ornamental artifacts that maintain their dispositional function even if removed from their specific context (e.g., ornamental chairs); artifacts built to perform a function that end up carrying out another (e.g., cable wires); as well as several emerging technologies (e.g., virtual assistants devices).

¹ On these accounts see for instance: Cummins 1975, Millikan 1984, 1993, 1999; Preston 1998, 2009; Keil 1989, Rips 1989, Neander 1991, Matan and Carey 2001, McLaughlin 2001, Thomasson 2003, 2007, 2014; Baker 2007, Elder 2007, Grandy 2007, Carrara and Vermaas 2009, Houkes and Vermaas 2010, Carrara and Mingardo 2013, Vega-Encabo and Lawler 2014, Franssen et al. 2014, Eynine 2016.

² On these accounts see for instance: Millikan 1984, 1993, 1999; Neander 1991; Dipert 1993; Griffith 1993; Searle 1995; Preston 1998; McLaughlin 2001; Houkes and Vermaas 2003; Scheele 2005, 2006; Thomasson 2003, 2007, 2014; Eynine 2016.