Unintentional Intentionality

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Abstract:

Intention is a necessary condition for John Searle's concept of derived intentionality; it is what bestows the intentionality of mental states on physical phenomena. This may be true for illocutionary acts but not for all instances of intentionality in the physical realm. I discuss cases of unintentional intentionality, starting with the example of the wave-poem by Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels (1982) and continuing with cases that implement images rather than text, that is, pareidolia. Furthermore, I criticise the dependency of the intentionality of physical phenomena on the intentionality of mind, suggested by the adjective 'derived'.

Keywords: intentionality, derived intentionality, meaning intention, pareidolia

Intentionality is a property attributed to mental states, namely the property to be directed towards or 'about' things. Some philosophers attribute a related property to certain physical phenomena, referred to as derived or derivative intentionality. The intentionality of the physical phenomenon is hereby understood as derived from the (intrinsic) intentionality of the mind. John Searle introduced the notion of derived intentionality, and he posits that the intention with which the act is performed bestows intentionality on physical phenomena (Searle, 1983). What a speaker means is explained by the intention with which the utterance is made, particularly by what Searle calls 'meaning intention'.[1] Although he focused on speech acts, he attributed derived intentionality to a wider range of phenomena, including writing and pictures (Searle, 1980). The idea that a sentence is the expression of a thought and that to express or represent something, we need to have the intention to do so seems intuitive. For Searle, intention is a necessary condition for derived intentionality. But is this true for all instances of intentionality in the physical realm? I will discuss cases of unintentional intentionality, starting with Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels' wave-poem example (1982) and continuing with cases that implement images rather than text, that is, pareidolia. Furthermore, I will criticise the dependency of the intentionality of physical phenomena on the intentionality of mind, suggested by the adjective 'derived'.

To discuss unintentional intentionality, we begin with Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels' wave poem: walking along the beach, we come across the stanza of a poem written in the sand. We can read and understand the writing, and we may assume that someone has written it there.

Eventually, a wave washes over it and astonishingly leaves another stanza behind, which seems to continue the poem. Knapp and Michaels concluded that while in the first case, we assume that the sentences have meaning, i.e. semantic content, because we suppose the existence of an author (and his intention); in the second case, we do not attribute meaning to the signs in the sand. As there is no author, but the marks appear accidentally, for them, the second stanza is not a linguistic phenomenon. They proceed to consider sentences produced by a computer, arguing that meaning in this case depends on whether we can attribute intentions to computers and not on the possibility of 'intentionless language' (Knapp & Michaels, 1982). Searle's position is referenced in their account, introduced with the sentence, 'The claim that all meanings are intentional is not, of course, an unfamiliar one in contemporary philosophy of language' (ibid., 727). In response, Searle offers a further example: Suppose a cat wanders over the keys of a computer keyboard and out comes the perfect English sentence 'The chair is made of wood'. He argues that nothing prevents us from taking this instance as an English sentence and attributing meaning to it since

> Languages are human institutions and thus are intentionalistic through and through. But it is a mistake to confuse the intentionality of the system with the requirement that every element of the system be the product of an actual human intention. (Searle 1994, 680)

Searle claimed that Knapp and Michaels misunderstood his point. In his view, a sentence is the standing possibility of an intentional speech act. Conversely, Knapp and Michaels believe that without the instantiation of the author's intention, nothing is a sentence. I further suggest that Knapp and Michaels seemingly confused intentionality with intention. In the passages mentioned earlier, they debate the possibility of an 'intentionless language' and the claim that 'all meanings are intentional'. In neither case is it clear if they mean 'intentional' in the technical sense. Furthermore, there is no instance in the text in which intentionality is explicitly addressed in a technical sense, such as through paraphrase. It seems that for them, the 'intentionality of language' means the 'intendedness of a sentence or speech act'. This is not implausible, given that Knapp and Michaels background is literary theory, in which the author's intention is widely discussed.[2] Even in philosophy, it is uncommon to attribute the term intentionality to writing and utterances. Rather, one would speak of reference or representation, whereas intentionality is typically attributed to states of mind. Searle applied the concept of intentionality to physical phenomena, such as writings, utterances, and pictures, referring to it as derived intentionality. For him, 'linguistic meaning is a form of derived intentionality' (Searle 1983, 175). For now, I will use 'meaning' or something 'being meaningful' based on Searle's sense as something 'having derived intentionality', but I will differentiate this later.

Instances of unintentional intentionality, such as the wave-poem or the cat-on-the-keyboard example, are unproblematic for Searle. According to him, we understand a correct sentence in a language familiar to us,

> weaned from all production or origin, putative or otherwise. [...] because a meaningful sentence is just

> a standing possibility of the corresponding (intentional) speech act. To understand it, it is necessary to know that anyone who said it and meant it would be performing that speech act determined by the rules of the language that gives the sentence its meaning in the first place. (Searle 1977, 202)

The rules of language and the standing possibility of an author's intention ensure intentionality in such cases. This suggests that not every instance of language–that is, every written sentence or speech act–has to be made with the intention of an author, but it is the standing intention that readers presuppose that makes the ascription of meaning possible. The reader does not necessarily need access to the particular intention with which the act is performed, nor does there need to be a particular intention involved in the first place. This allows for examples such as the wave poem or the cat-on-the-keyboard. In these cases, there is no intention of the author (the cat)[3], or there is no author in the first place (waves washing over the sand), but in both cases, such accidental agglomerations of signs can appear meaningful if they form a (more or less) correct sentence in a language we are familiar with. It seems that the conditions for intentionality differ according to the author's perspective and that of the reader or listener. From the author's perspective, the necessary steps to get from the possession of an intentional state to the performance of an illocutionary act, according to Searle, are (a1) the expression of that intentional state according to the rules of the language used, and (a2) the performance of the illocutionary act with the intention of some author. From the perspective of the reader, the understanding of a sentence is constituted by (r1) the reader being firm in the rules of the language used and (r2) the reader presupposing the standing possibility of the speech act being performed with the intention of some author.

Clearly, languages are human 'institutions', systems that function according to a set of rules, which are essentially based on intentionality. This implies that in order to impose intentionality on a physical item/event, one must (a1) (per)form an item/event that fulfils the rules of language, and the intentionality of such an item/event can be understood if (r1) the audience is firm in the rules of (that) language. However, it is unclear why the intentionality of physical phenomena must necessarily be linked to an author's intention, even if we understand this as the standing possibility of such an intention. According to Searle, (a2) is necessary because there is a difference between saying something and meaning it and saying something without meaning it.

> [People] make noises, or marks on paper; they draw pictures, or wave their arms about etc. Now my problem is: what must be added to these noises, marks, etc., in order that they should be statements, orders, etc.? What, so to speak, must be added to the physics to get the semantics? (Searle 1986, 209)

However, the thing 'to be added' does not seem to be a question of how something gathers semantic content but rather of how something becomes a speech act. There is a difference between uttering a sentence and meaning it: for example, singing a song in a foreign language. We can sing a sentence meaning it and without meaning (or understanding) it. Searle is interested in this difference. He asks how noises become a statement, an order, etc. Therefore, the 'meaning intention'

seems to refer to what we mean to do by making these noises. However, although a sung sentence may not be meant, it still has meaning. If, for example, our friend Katrin is singing along to a song on the radio: *'a cadeeeeiiira e feita de madeeiiiira'*, she might not mean to say that 'the chair is out of wood'. She may not even know the meaning of the words she is singing. And we might not understand them either because we do not speak Portuguese or because of her pronunciation. However, this is a correct Portuguese sentence and a Portuguese speaker would be able to understand it. Therefore, the difference in this case is what Katrin means to do, that is, singing along to a song or making a statement, not what the sentence means. Catherine Talmage argued that Searle failed to distinguish clearly between 'meaning' in the sense of the semantic meaning of a sentence and 'meaning' in the sense of a speaker meaning to do something by uttering that sentence (Talmage, 1996). Something can be said without meaning to, which nevertheless has meaning. In Katrin's case, we could still doubt whether what she meant to do was only to sing along to the song or if she (also) meant to make a statement. Let us suppose that Katrin pronounces the sentence 'The chair is made of wood' while being thoroughly asleep. She articulates a correct English sentence, and we can understand it. We would not hold her responsible for what she said because we do not consider a person in that situation an agent. However, what she utters forms a correct sentence nonetheless, and nothing prevents us from understanding it. She does not mean what she says, that is, her utterance is not a speech act, but the uttered sounds can be considered an instance of intentionality because they form a correct sentence, and thus seem to be about something. Thus, (a2) might be true for illocutionary acts but not for all instances of intentionality.

Let us look at (r2). Is it necessary from the perspective of the reader, listener, or observer to presuppose the (standing) intention of an author to understand a physical phenomenon as an instance of intentionality? In most cases, there is a reason to presuppose an author, and in these cases, readers and audiences assume the intention of such an author and often wonder about the particular intention she had. When we read a sentence from a book, an advertisement on a billboard, or graffiti on a wall, we usually assume an author and her intention.[4] Even when we read a poem in the sand, as described by Knapp and Michaels, we initially assume an author's intention. However, after a wave washes over it and leaves behind another poem, we are certain of witnessing an accidental agglomeration of signs in the sand. Still, these signs make sense to us, and nothing prevents us from understanding them. It seems necessary that the accidental agglomeration of signs forms a correct sentence in a language we are familiar with. However, is it necessary for their understanding to presuppose (r2) the standing possibility of an author's intention? What could this 'standing intention' actually be? There are many cases where the author is not present, and we do not witness her performance. For example, Searle (1977) mentions the sentence of a dead author, 'On the twentieth of September 1793, I set out on a journey from London to Oxford'. In this case, the standing intention could be related to the production of the sentence and the context in which it is read. When we read a sentence in a book, we assume that there was an author who intended to make such a statement, because it is a printed sentence in a book, so someone must have decided to print

it; before that, someone must have submitted it for publication, and before that, someone must have written or typed it. When we read the sentence scratched in the seat in front of us while sitting on a train, we assume the author and her intention because someone must have meant to scratch it there. However, in the case of the wave poem, we just saw the wave wash over the first stanza and leave behind a second stanza, so we would not assume that it was written there by someone. We are astonished by this coincidence and bemused that the random signs seem to make sense. It is precisely the absence of an author (and her intention) that elicits such bemusement. What could a standing intention be in this case? Maybe that the sentence could be used by someone in a speech act; that is, the possibility to appropriate the signs for an author's intention. However, in this case, (r2) is not necessary to understand the signs, rather because someone understands the signs they might appropriate them. In a more general sense, the standing intention might be inherent to the conventions of language; it could be the presupposition that, at some point, someone attributed a certain meaning to a certain sign and that this was done intentionally. This presupposition may be implicit in our use of language. In this sense, (r2) would be true for strongly conventional signs, like most words we use in language.

(r2) may be true for texts and other manifestations of language. However, if we now consider images, we find that this is changing the setup significantly. Let us assume that our wave does not leave behind a poem but a clearly delineated portrait of a particular person, say Madonna. We do not follow the lines of the drawing as we would follow the words that form a sentence, but the image is more instantly recognisable to us. At least at the level of 'face value'. Also images can be highly coded when used in a manner that implies complex contexts and conventions. We even sometimes speak of having to 'read' an image or of a 'language of images'. In this case, I do not discuss such coded uses of images but the basic recognition of an object or portrait. We said that (r2) might be true for strongly conventional signs because the intention of an author can be understood as implicit in the arbitrary conventions of language. Regarding images, this setup is changing; images are not an arbitrary system agreed upon by convention. In the case of images, we would not assume that at some point, someone (intentionally) attributed a certain meaning to a certain sign, as we might assume in the case of language.[5] Images are partly recognised through their likeness to the things depicted, whereas the words we use to signify things usually do not bear likeness to the things signified.[6] Symbols, signs, and pictograms may form exceptions and must be discussed separately. The crucial difference for my argument is the arbitrariness of linguistic meaning. This helped maintain (r2) that the reader presupposes the standing possibility of the speech act being performed with the intention of some author. Also images have conventions of use and may be highly coded. However, in the case of the wave portrait, we recognise Madonna because the signs in the sand look like her. We do not presuppose that at some point, someone intentionally attributed the meaning 'Madonna' to that particular sign. However, (r2) applies only to arbitrary signs.

The phenomenon of seeing images in accidental stimuli is also referred to as pareidolia, such as recognizing shapes in clouds, seeing a man (alternatively, a rabbit) in the moon, or the face of the

Virgin Mary on a piece of toast. Scientific research considers pareidolia a sensory illusion because one is attending to an actual stimulus such that a familiar pattern is perceived. The same could be said about representations, only we usually assume that someone made them with some purpose. The tendency to recognise faces in accidental stimuli is particularly high. Recent neuroscientific research has shown that our sensory system works similarly if confronted with (what they call) an illusionary face or a real one. For example, we track the gaze of illusionary faces in the same manner we track the eyes of a person in front of us (Takahashi & Watanabe, 2015). Several studies have investigated pareidolia using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), and the results indicate, among other things, that the interpretation of accidental stimuli depends on processes similar to those elicited by real objects. This is related to the finding that such recognition occurs at a relatively early stage of perception and is not a late cognitive reinterpretation of sense data (Voss et al., 2012). Some researchers have suggested that our sensitivity to face recognition and its location in early sensory processes may also explain why the mere perception of a face can produce the same reactions we have when we look at a real person (Kaufmann et al., 2018). The fact that image recognition is not a late cognitive reinterpretation of sense data but can occur at an early stage of perception supports our theoretical observations that (r2) the presupposition of a standing intention is not necessary for intentionality.

One could argue that the viewer's intention is necessary for intentionality, that the viewer wants to see a face, as in games of seeing-in, where one tries to find shapes in the clouds passing by. We sometimes play such games and what we want to see (or read) certainly influences the meaning we attribute to that image or sign. However, this does not imply that the viewer's intention is necessary for intentionality. This is because it cannot explain the case in which recognising a face on a piece of toast comes as a surprise. We might dismiss the thought as absurd; we might laugh about it and not take it further seriously. And we can only experience this reaction because we recognise something in the first place. There is something to the toast that looks like something else–that is, pointing beyond itself. Therefore, the toast can be considered to have intentional properties. It is important to distinguish between intentionality and meaning at this point. As mentioned earlier, Searle claims that linguistic meaning is a form of derived intentionality. However, this should not imply that intentionality and meaning are identical. Rather, they stand in an asymmetrical relationship: if there is meaning, there must be intentionality, but not vice versa. We can identify intentional properties in/on physical phenomena, such as an agglomeration of marks that form a correct sentence or bear a likeness to the features of a person. However, even though we can say that these marks have an intentional property, they only have meaning if a viewer reads them as meaningful or if an author intends to express a meaning through them. In this sense intentionality is not identical to meaning; rather the intentional properties of physical phenomena can be described as potentially meaningful.

Discussing cases of unintentional intentionality and considering not only text but also images, we can see that (a2) may be true for illocutionary acts but not for all instances of intentionality. As

the phenomenal range of intentionality for Searle includes, next to utterances and writings, also pictures, it follows that intention is not a necessary condition for intentionality.

When confronted with instances of intentionality in the physical realm, two aspects appear relevant: (1) the correspondence of content in different forms; and (2) the idea of consequence. The first seems unproblematic, whereas the second is debatable. The first aspect (1) describes the fact that we encounter instances of intentionality in mental states and artefacts that are directed towards, that are 'about' the same thing. The second aspect (2) is the case if (1) is given and one of these instances is the consequence of the other. In many cases an author expresses a mental state in a text, performance, or image, and thus imposes intentionality on a physical phenomenon. These are examples of illocutionary acts. In these cases the instance of intentionality in the physical realm is a consequence of the intentionality of a mental state and the author's intention. There are also mistakes and unsuccessful attempts, but these cases do not lack intention; rather the intention confirms the failure. Here, (2) is given, but (1) is not. In cases of unintentional intentionality, the opposite is true: (2) is not given, but (1) is.

Searle developed the concept of derived intentionality to ground his speech-act theory. This becomes apparent in the adjective 'derived'. This adjective indicates the relationship between the intentionality of the mind and the intentionality of physical phenomena: the intentionality of the physical phenomenon is understood as derived from the (intrinsic) intentionality of the mind. The intention with which an act is performed imposes intentionality on physical phenomena. Since it could be shown that intention is not a necessary condition for all cases of intentionality, the dependency of the intentionality of physical items and events on the intentionality of the mind has to be questioned. Such a dependency may exist for meaning but not for intentionality. When confronted with physical instances of intentionality, we cannot infer that they are a consequence of a corresponding mental state. We can only be certain that there are instances of intentionality in mental states and physical phenomena; however we cannot infer that they are necessarily consequences of each other.

Conclusion

Searle's claim that intention is a necessary condition for intentionality has been refuted. In cases of unintentional intentionality, we are confronted with accidental agglomerations of signs or marks; however, we are still able to understand the text or recognise an image. Considering examples of images and not only text, we can see that intention (be it a particular or standing intention) is not a necessary condition for the intentionality of physical phenomena. I further criticised the dependency of the intentionality of physical phenomena on the intentionality of mind, suggested by the adjective 'derived'. We can attribute intentional properties to both mental states and physical phenomena, but to determine a causality between them is not always conclusive. Differentiating intentionality and meaning, and understanding the intentionality of physical phenomena as independent of the intentionality of the mind is, among other things, relevant for discussing AI-generated images and texts.

Endnotes:

1. Searle's point of departure is Paul Grice's claim that language is dependent on mind, in the sense that for speakers to mean something is to have a certain set of intentions directed at an actual or possible audience (Grice 1969). Searle disagrees with the idea that this intention has to imply the production of effects in the audience, because he realised that 'meaning exists independently of the intention to communicate that meaning' (Searle 1986, 211). For Searle to mean something by an utterance is to intend its production as the performance of a speech act, what he calls the 'meaning intention'.
2. However, even with respect to the author's intention we have to differentiate the discourses. Whether the author's intention should be a norm for the meaning of a work, or the author's intention is necessary for any kind of meaning to exist, is a different question. I could insist on the importance of the author's intention (and the context of production, etc.) for the purpose of interpretation by art history or art criticism, parallel to the argument that intention is not a necessary condition for intentionality in the philosophy of mind.
3. Of course, the cat might have several intentions for walking over the keyboard, but (probably) not the intention to write the sentence 'The chair is made of wood'.
4. Actually, this assumption is becoming less and less common, given the increasing presence of AI-generated images and texts.
5. The notion that the conventions of language originate in an intentional act of denomination by some author(s) is merely a hypothetical assumption that a reader may have, and does not pertain to the actual formation of the conventions of language.
6. Likeness is not something that can define images (for a critique of likeness theories of images see for example Oliver Scholz, 2004), but it does form an important difference to the arbitrariness of linguistic signs.

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