

# Design, Use, and the Physical and Intentional Aspects of Technical Artifacts

Maarten Franssen

It has been argued that technical artifacts are a special category of objects that require a combination of the physical and intentional ‘descriptions of the world’. In this chapter, I question this point of view. Any object can figure in the intentional actions of some person, for example as being used for a purpose. A more interesting question is whether there is a unique most adequate way of intentionally describing a technical artifact as what it is for, or, in other words, to what extent the character of an object as a particular sort of technical artifact is fixed. In this contribution I argue against the view that it is fixed. What an artifact is for generally depends both on what it was designed for and on what it is being used for. A consequence of this view is that the metaphysical status of technical artifacts, in the form of a precise answer to the question what sort of artifact it is, or whether it is or is not an artifact of some particular kind, is vague or indeterminate in cases where its use does not match its design. This, however, is precisely the sort of metaphysical vagueness that pervades the intentional conceptualization, as can be illustrated by arguments from the writings of Parfit and Davidson.

## 1 Artifacts and Natural Objects

The lilies of the field may not toil or spin, but many animals do, and among all animals members of the species *Homo sapiens* are notorious for considering the furniture of the natural world too sparse to their liking. Due to *Homo faber*’s diligent tool-making, the world now contains a great many material objects that are man-made objects or artifacts. This is not to say that everything that is man-made is a material object. Rules, instructions, and organizational schemes, for either men or machines, are not, and they form a special, elusive category that merits more philosophical attention than I can give in this paper. I will, therefore, ignore that category completely and restrict my discussion to the category of material artifacts.

---

M. Franssen, Delft University of Technology

Likewise, not everything that results from humankind's creative interference with its environment is an artifact. The waste products of this interference, such as exhaust fumes or sawdust, are not. One cannot, therefore, single out artifacts from the totality of material objects by defining them as those objects that have come into existence through the interference of people. Such a loose characterization would also include accidental objects like broken-off twigs or rocks or our body's waste products among the artifacts. An artifact does not just come into existence through the causal mediation of people; it is created through an intentional act. The category waste products shows, however, that this is still too loose a definition. To be a 'true' artifact, the object must not only come into existence as the result of an intentional act, the act's intention must be to create precisely this object, taking into account the limits that skill and knowledge put on this precision.

For most artifacts, certainly the ones that we call *technical* artifacts, this can be put even more strongly: they are not merely intentionally created, they are created with a specific *purpose* in mind. Put like this, however, it is not clear how this amounts to a stronger claim. In every intentional act there is some purpose involved, in the sense of a state of the world that the actor is aiming to realize through the act. The point is that technical artifacts are created with a purpose in mind that transcends the designer's act of creation, a purpose that clings to the artifact, so to speak, after its creator has left the stage. This is indeed how we conceptualize technical artifacts in everyday life: our toolbox is filled with objects that we think of as *being* screwdrivers, wrenches, and so forth. The 'for-ness' clinging to technical artifacts eludes the physical description of nature. Technical artifacts remain physical objects that are subject to the laws of nature like any material object in the universe. Additionally, however, unlike ordinary natural objects, their being 'for a purpose' gives them an intentional 'side', since purposes are things entertained by persons having intentionality. Consequently, to describe artifacts 'adequately' or 'fully', both the physical and the intentional aspects have to be accounted for, or brought into play.

This may all seem straightforward, but what is not so straightforward is how these two aspects have to be brought into play, or what determines whether a description in which the physical and the intentional aspects have both been brought into play is 'adequate', or what an adequate description says about the artifact it describes. These are the questions that I wish to address in this chapter. In the account that I draw up in this chapter, in my attempt to answer these questions, I will emphasize the role of the artifact's user as well as the artifact's designer. The designer of an artifact may be considered to have a privileged position as far as the form of and the adequacy of a description of an artifact is concerned, because he or she, supposedly, is the first to draft one. This is not, however, a view that I will defend in this chapter, or at least not without considerable reservation.

The plan of this chapter is as follows. In the next section, I argue that the physical and intentional descriptions are not complementary but that the former is contained in the latter. In section 3, I argue that the for-ness of a technical artifact is determined both by its design and by its use. In section 4, I discuss the seemingly