1. Introduction to meta-ethics

What are we talking about when the keyword is “meta-ethics”? It’s possible to understand just by the name that our interest is put in a study field whose aim is “checking on something about something”.

Etymology: meta + ethics: a discipline dealing with the foundations of ethics specifically with the nature of normative utterances and ethical justification

In philosophy, in fact, meta-ethics is the branch of ethics that looks for an explanation of ethical properties’ nature: the goal is finding a reason of some attitudes, properties and judgments of ordinary life. So, we can summarize saying that it’s a sort of a philosophical reflection about moral and ethics theories. Meta-ethics is the third, and final, step of an “ethical itinerary”, in fact, before arriving to it, there are two necessary early stages that will be the topic of meta-ethical theories. The two previous steps are the following: the first is the ordinary daily human behavior with no theoretical side to investigate because it’s just our life, our innate way to live in the world; the second level, on the contrary, is the beginning of the insertion in the philosophical world: at this level the ones who act are not the “ordinary people” but the philosophers that try to explain and justify moral judgments that are involved in the first order; that’s here the moral philosophy birth. It’s in this way that meta-ethics begins because philosophers talk about the moral theories and try to confine them in three settings that are “metaphysics” (what are moral properties about?), “semantics” (what kind of concepts are they?) and “epistemology” (can they be scientifically studied?) . So, we can summarize saying that meta-ethics studies the ethics language to analyze

1 www.philosophy.enacademic.com/1509/metaethics
its claims' validity conditions and the possibility to ethically talk in a universal way.

Meta-ethics doesn’t teach us what is right and whether is wrong, but what something is right or wrong”. Dependently on different answers to the question “Is there Moral Truth?” there are several meta-ethics positions about the realism. Obviously the first division is between Realism and Anti-Realism and their followers categorizations.²

2. John Searle, a philosopher of language and mind with a particular importance in meta-ethics

John Rogers Searle (Denver, 31st July 1932) is an American still living philosopher that is a philosophy professor at the California University, in Berkley. He’s particularly known and important thanks to his theories concerning the contemporary philosophy of language and philosophy of mind. His whole academic studies have been place in Oxford, first at Christ Church College then at university. In meta-ethics he is particularly important for his concept of “direction of fit”.

3. Rationality in action: The existence of a practical reason

Concerning his moral position, in one of his most important books called Rationality in action, Searle lets understand that he takes inspiration from Kant’s theory, in particular from the idea that reasons on its own can motivate not only desires but also actions. He thinks that action can be motivated by reason that doesn’t involve previous desires. In fact, reason is able to find motivations for every action without always creating new desires.

What is a reason for an action? This question is supposed to be frightfully difficult […] But why should it be so hard? After all, don't we deal

² The most important positions concerning moral realism are: Quasi-realism, Analytic realism and Synthetic realism (non-minimalist truth) and Non-cognitivism, Error theory, Fictionalism and Espressivism (from Anti-realism, minimalist truth) [First lesson map]
with reasons for action every day? How can there be a mystery? [...] We can infer [...] that certain formal features would be possessed by any entity that was a reason for an action. For example, its existence and operation would have to be consistent with the gap. That is, it would have to be the sort of thing that could rationally motivate an action in such a way that an agent-self could act on it, though it does not cause the action by sufficient conditions. Furthermore, it seems it would have to have a content that was logically related in certain specific ways to the contents of a prior intention and an intention-in-action (both of which have the upward direction of fit) for which it was the reason.³

In the first chapter, Searle defines a view of rationality that he opposes and discusses throughout the book. This view, called the Classical Model of Rationality, is defined by the exposition of six assumptions:

1. Actions, where rational, are caused by beliefs and desires;
2. Rationality is a matter of obeying rules, the special rules that make the distinction between rational and irrational thought and behavior;
3. Rationality is a separate cognitive faculty;
4. Apparent cases of weakness of will, what the Greeks called *akrasia*, can arise only in cases where there is something wrong with the action’s antecedents;
5. Practical reason has to start with an inventory of the agent’s primary ends, including goals, desires, objectives, and purposes; and these are not themselves subject to rational constraints;
6. The whole system works only if the set of primary desires is consistent.

Searle claims that all of these six postulates are untenable, and refuting them, sets the stage for developing a better theory of rationality. Practical rationality, according to the philosopher, has to recognize moral facts: it means that it has to know deals made by our acting into institutions and record normative reasons for independent from desires actions. This kind of moral realism admits the existence of essentially normative moral facts, neglecting moral knowledge’s

specificity. Practical rationality begins with the agent’s primary ends (including goals and desires) to figure out how best to satisfy the set of them.

In theoretical reason the end product is a belief or acceptance of a proposition; in practical reason it is a prior intention or intention -in-action. A consequence of the analysis of the intentionality of action […] is that actions have intentional contents. So it is not at all mysterious that actions can be the result of a process of reasoning. Just as theoretical reason ends in a belief or an acceptance of a proposition, so practical reason ends in a prior intention to act or an actual action[…]4

Every kind of actions has an intentional content that we can control by our practical reason in order to aim our prefixed goal and to satisfy our desires. For example, in the same chapter (number 5), Searle says that if it’s raining outside and I have the desire to stay dry, I immediately create a secondary desire to carry the umbrella so I leave my house carrying it. “Each of the last three steps, including the action itself, has intentional content motivated by the prior steps”.5

Searle’s idea is that rationality is independent from our desires. For example he thinks that the fact that you promised to do something means you should do it because you are involved in a set of constitutive rules that are related to the promise. So, he believes rationality not as a system but more or less as an “adverb”: we can consider some behaviors rational without considering the sources and our system derives from finding patterns in what we think it’s rational. Generally, in Searle’s theory, in rational actions there’s a gap between motivating desire and the decision. This gap is also known as “free will”. In his point of view, every rational action is founded on the free will so the rationality is possible just where we can have a choice among different possibilities, both rational and irrational.

4 Ibidem, chapter 5
5 Previous note
4. **Intentionality: every action has an intentional content**

Another important Searle’s piece is *Intentionality*, a book in which the philosopher talks about what there is at the beginning of every action in the world. In Searle’s philosophy the concept of intention is older than the practical reason one but, anyway, the two are strongly related. In particular, *Intentionality* is focused on the development of philosophy of mind and, together with *Speech Acts*, is an important contribute to the contemporary philosophy of language. First of all, Searle’s aim is to investigate the problem of meaning which concerns how people impose intentionality on entities that are not intrinsically intentional, how they get mere objects to represent. By this book or, better said, this essay of philosophy of mind, the American philosopher concentrates his attention first upon perception and then, as an “investigation trip” about biologically based phenomena, on action, its intentional causations, mental capacities, linguistic intentions and, at last, on meanings.

First, on my account only some, not all, mental states and events have Intentionality. Beliefs, fears, hopes and desires are Intentional:[…]If I tell you I have a belief or desire, it always make sense for you to ask, “What is exactly that you believe” or “What is that you desire?”; and it won’t do for me to say, “Oh I just have a belief and a desire without believing anything or desiring anything”. My beliefs and desires must always be about something.

Intentionality is not the same as consciousness. Many conscious states are not intentional; such unconscious beliefs are just beliefs that one has even if normally he doesn’t think about. Besides, intending and intentions are just one form of Intentionality among others: they have not special status.

In the third chapter of the book, Searle’s attention is for the relationship between intention and action. “At first sight intention and actions seem to fit very

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 neatly into the system”. Developing this idea, the philosopher arrives to the conception that an intentional action is simply the conditions of satisfaction of an intention. But not all intentional actions have prior intentions, so he summarizes “building” three claims:

[...] first there is a distinction between prior intentions and intentions in actions; second that both are causally self-referential; and third that the action, for example, of raising one’s arm contains two components, the experience of acting (which has a form of Intentionality that is both presentational and causal), and the event of one’s arm going up.

A specific case of Intentionality, according to Searle, is the “illocutionary act”. In it, he recognizes an intentional phenomenon’s property that he calls direction of fit. For example, when a person sees a flower, his mental state is disposed for being adapted to the world state; in cases as this, we have a mind-to-world direction of fit. On the other hand, if the person picks up the flower, his intention is to adapt the world to his mental state; that’s why we have a world-to-mind direction of fit. Searle analyses the intention in action as having a direction of fit and a direction of causation: the first is world-to-mind. The second, on the contrary is mind-to-world: the cause of a movement is the intention in actions.

Furthermore, Searle develops the concept of Background that is the set of abilities, capacities, tendencies and dispositions that humans have and that are not themselves intentional states.

The Background is a set of nonrepresentational mental capacities that enable all representing to take place. Intentional states only have the conditions of satisfaction that they do, and thus only are the states that they

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9 Ivi, c.3, p. 79
10 Ivi, c.3, p.91
11 According to Austin, the linguistic act can be divided in the levels: the locutionary act (the act of saying something), the illocutionary act (the action made by saying something) and the perlocutionary act (the effect that we have saying something). Illocutory acts have the illocutory strength, expressed by linguistic indicators.
are, against a Background of abilities that are not themselves Intentional states\textsuperscript{12}.

The Background is important to understand several things as the literary meaning, metaphors and so on. It’s not intentional but it’s necessary for the understanding of the intentionality in action.

5. The direction of fit in Searle

What is the direction of fit? In Meta-ethics it’s a very discussed topic concerning the nature of mental states and moral properties. How is our approach to the world? And how is world’s approach to us or, better said, to our actions?

Searle, particularly in his linguistic theory of speech acts, focuses his attention on the way in which our mind is related to the world. He admits four possibilities:

1. **The word-to-world direction of fit**: ex. “We are married”.
2. **The world-to-word direction of fit**: ex. “Will you marry me?”, “I want to marry him”, “You’d just better marry her!”
3. **The double direction of fit**: ex. “I declare you man and wife”.
4. **The null or empty direction of fit**: ex. “I’m glad I married you”.

6. Beyond the realism/idealism dichotomy

Searle’s reclaim to the fit sends to an unavoidable naturalization of this concept. Naturalizing fit involves the fact of making concepts more linked to the world where we live. In fact, actions, speeches and knowledge are considered as tools used by the man for a better adaptation to the world; in particular the idea of truth as our claims’ adaptation mind-to-world is right also for those linguistic acts whose aim is to create changes in the world to adapt it to our desires and needs. Speaking in a certain way about the world can allow us to be more suitable to it. We can change the world thanks to the word.

\textsuperscript{12} Intentionality. An essay in the philosophy of mind, Cambridge, Cambridge University press, 1983, c. 5, p. 143
On the other hand, the mind-to-world direction of fit involves a friction between mind and world, leaving every pretension of a pure correspondence between mind and reality itself: as facts are facts, every aspirant true theory has to be adapted to them. The result of Searle’s theory is not a unilateral fixing to reality, but a mutual fit mind-world and world-mind. In fact, in some circumstances it’s the world that has to “satisfy” the “requests” of the mind, but, in different moments, what happens is the opposite: some mental concept has to be forcibly linked to world’s reality and to depend on it.

With his theory, we can say that Searle succeeds in going beyond the traditional “realism/idealism dichotomy”: the apparent paradoxical co-existence of a theory of the truth as correspondence and holism\textsuperscript{13} refers to a realist conception of the object (in which the truth is a correspondence) and to the idealistic one in which the object is what is done in a specific language, paradigm or life form. This is possible thanks to the mutual relationship between world and mind, both related to the concept of adaptation in a sphere of fit. In Searle’s philosophy nothing is one-directional, that’s why there’s no need of the distinction realism-idealism.

In Searle’s perspective we have the idea of a world that is built on the basis of different ways in which it shows itself by our causal transactions with it. Every pretension of knowing it as it is, in this way, results unfounded. So he cannot be sure of the existence of a “neutral point of view” from which we can analyze the relations among our experiences and their supposed intentional objects to be able to understand if those cause these; on the other hand he can insist on the existence of the object against every phenomenal-relativist position for which the object is in the ways it appears. Because the object exists in the world, first of all, as object that can be analyzed by the sensorial sphere. The following step is mentally considering it. Appearing and existing, in fact, are not the same way to “be in the world”.

His new idea of “intentionality” of objects allows in putting Searle’s theory in a new kind of realism where it’s possible and it’s fair to develop a friction plane between mind and world. Since the reality cannot be known,

\textsuperscript{13} In philosophy, any doctrine that emphasizes the priority of a whole over its parts is holism.
perhaps, as it is but we cannot neglect its existence. According to the philosopher, in fact, reality is one and our mind belongs to it. So he thinks that we live in a unique world even if in this world we can go towards a particular form of reality that exists just because we think it exists. Because, as already said, even the word that depends on min has a relevant role in setting the world adjusting it on the basis of the speech act. There’s a mutual correspondence between mind and world that arrive to get more or less the same importance.

7. Contemporary moral philosophy: Moore and Searle

In contemporary moral philosophy, the moral is different from “a values world or some laws for the good living”, but it is configured as the way in which the man acts when he determines himself freely by his actions and his way to think dependently on certain situations that involves the moral. We can have moral attitudes in the world that, according to someone else, are immoral and vice-versa.

G.E. Moore\textsuperscript{14}, for example, thinks that actions start from the knowledge of different possibilities of a subject that chooses starting from them. In this way, the most right action is the most useful one. Furthermore, according to Moore, we can understand the idea of the “good” just by our intuition with no proofs in material world.

Searle’s theory, in a similar way but by different concepts, is based on the existence of a motivational strength of the reason independently from the introduction of human desires and feelings. In this way, we have the presence of obligations that are not controlled by the subject who is in a condition in which it’s obliged to do an action just because it has to do it even if the desire to do it could be the opposite.

Searle, in fact, insists on the existence of a practical reason that controls every action and its consequences allowing the follower satisfaction of our desires and Moore speaks about the knowledge of different possibilities. Both theories are

\textsuperscript{14}George Edward Moore (1873-1958) was an English philosopher important particularly for his position in analytic philosophy.
related to the thinking about the action and act dependently of what can be considered “right” an morally correct.

8. **Principal points of Searle’s philosophy of language**

Concerning Searle’s meta-ethical position and his concept of direction of fit, we could understand the main role of language in the philosopher’s theory. The word is one of the most important tool to have an approach to the real world. As I’ve already said, Searle has an important place in the contemporary philosophy of language. Even in this branch of the philosophy, Searle’s position is between the realism and pragmatics. Action and speech result totally linked. The philosopher, in fact, is considered, together with Austin and Grice, one of the most important figure of the linguistic “Pragmatics”. What is language for Searle? How can it be related to world? In *Speech acts* (1969) he elaborates a theory in which the intention has a particular role, like in his whole philosophical conception: he justifies it saying that the description of a speech act refers necessarily to the speaker’s intentions. Searle considers the intention as a mental state, a process related to being directed towards or linked to objects or things states in the world (beliefs, desires, fears, perceptions). Intentionality, in this way, is a mental property as a primitive process. The linguistic intentionality doesn’t involve the expression of propositions and the existence of conditions under which they might or might not be satisfied, but also requires the association of those propositions with illocutionary forces of various kinds. These illocutionary forces determine the various kinds of speech acts (asserting, promising, marrying, etc.) that language characteristically makes possible. Besides, mental intentionality is related to propositions several types of models.

Linguistic meaning derives from the understanding of conventional procedures: that is the point that we can link to Searle’s conception of Background.

 […] the philosophy of language has to deal with a whole lot of other questions, such as: What is truth? What is reference? What is logic? What
are logical relations? What is a use of language and how does use relate to meaning? […] The philosophy of language also deals with empirical facts, but generally the purpose is to get at certain underlying universal features of meaning and communication, and especially to analyze the logical structure of reference, truth necessity, speech acts, etc. and these analyses are not given by just analyzing the empirical facts about this or that particular language.  

9. Meta-ethical conclusions

From a meta-ethical point of view, Searle’s theory is particularly focused on the existence of something “natural” that controls actions. The most important and discussed point is the existence of a special kind of rationality that is related to the intentionality view as a natural phenomenon. Searle’s theory could be insert in a special moral realism that has its “floor” in pragmatism and cognitivism because world and mind have a mutual correspondence and lots of contact points. The philosopher has a particular view of the world, the word and the action. His tension to the practical side of the life is also important for collocating him in a naturalist frame of contemporary moral philosophy.

Answering the three meta-ethical questions I’ve talked in the first paragraph about, it’s possible to put a full stop at this essay in the following way:

1. Metaphysically talking, Searle’s moral properties are about the existence of something prior than an action that are the practical rationality and the intentionality which, by their link to the life of a subject, control its life;

2. Semantically answering, these concepts aren’t just theoretical because they are related to every meaning that we meet in our ordinary life, also in our linguistic frame. Mental and real are perfectly united and consequential.

3. Epistemologically studying these theories, it’s possible to insert them in a realist-naturalist-cognitivist view of the world that involves every part of the life with particular attention to the practical side, without losing the philosophical beauty.

Bibliography

- Notes about the concept of metaethics

Links

- www.philosophy.enacademic.com/1509/metaethics
- www.revel.inf.br/files/entrevistas/revel_8_interview_john_searle.pdf