**Fanaticism in the manosphere**

Mark Alfano, Macquarie University

Paul-Mikhail Catapang Podosky, Macquarie University

**Abstract:** This chapter explores a case study in contemporary fanaticism. We adopt Katsafanas’s conceptualization of fanaticism to make possible an in-depth discussion of and evaluation of a diffuse but important social movement — the anglophone manosphere. According to Katsafanas, fanatics are fruitfully understood as members of a group that adopts sacred values which they hold unconditionally to preserve their own psychic unity, and who feel that those values are threatened by those who do not accept them. The manosphere includes several social movements, including incels, men’s rights activists, and men-going-their-own-way. We show that many members of these groups are well-characterized by Katsafanas’s theory of fanaticism, and that they have forged their fanatical group identity using tools that philosophers have tended to associate with more benign social movements and the task of “conceptual engineering.” Indeed, we think that manosphere groups have in many cases been more successful than more palatable liberationist movements, and that this case study in the dark side of conceptual engineering may be both sobering and informative.

**Keywords:** fanaticism, extremism, masculinity, manophere, conceptual engineering

Would anyone like to have a little look down into the secret of how *ideals are fabricated* on this earth? Who has enough pluck?... Come on! Here we have a clear glimpse into this dark workshop.

~ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, essay 1, section 14

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# 1 Introduction

This chapter explores a case study in contemporary fanaticism. We do not offer our own novel definition of fanaticism, instead adopting one offered by Paul Katsafanas (2019) in order to make space for an in-depth discussion and evaluation of a diffuse but important social movement — the anglophone manosphere.[[1]](#footnote-0) According to Katsafanas, fanatics are fruitfully understood as members of a group that adopts sacred values which they hold unconditionally to preserve their own psychic unity, and who feel that those values are threatened by those who do not accept them. We argue that, by these standards, many participants in the manosphere qualify as fanatics.

We understand the manosphere to include a range of actors.[[2]](#footnote-1) Perhaps the most prominent are resentful and entitled young men who feel that their sexual, romantic, and emotional needs are not being serviced as they ought to be — many of whom identify as incels (short for involuntary celibates). Another group is men’s rights activists, who tend to be older and are resentful in a different way: in many cases they seem to think that their legitimate expectations about marriage, civil partnership, or child-rearing have not been met, and that the legal system is built in both subtle and non-subtle ways to ensure that they must foot the bill — financially, socially, and even physically — for relationships that they regret. Still-older men who seem mostly to have gone through divorce or other sorts of break-ups identify as men-going-their-own-way (MGTOW). While they lack the fiery resentment of incels and the litigious persistence of men’s rights activists, they nevertheless harbor deeply misogynistic attitudes and dispositions that motivate them to engage in ongoing, sometimes vitriolic discussions of gender relations. Allied with, and sometimes indistinguishable from, these gender-based social movements are a range of xenophobic and otherwise-chauvanistic social movements, whose members obsess over miscegenation, differential birth rates between white and non-white populations within their own countries, and immigration from predominantly non-white to predominantly-white countries. A prominent example is Brenton Tarrant, who perpetrated terroristic mass murder against Muslims in New Zealand several ago.

What unites these seemingly-disparate groups is a fixation on social hierarchies, and an insistence that they must reclaim their deserved position atop these hierarchies. In previous work (Roose et al. 2022; Alfano et al. 2022), we have argued that there are three main dimensions to these hierarchies, and that they receive different levels of emphasis among different groups. First, there is the inter-gender dimension. All of the groups under analysis are concerned with relations of domination between men and women. Incels, for instance, often seem to think that women are dominant even though the official public story is that they are not. Men’s rights activists point to ways in which women benefit from legal protections that men do not enjoy (especially when it comes to child custody and military service). MGTOW complain about social and legal benefits that divorcées sometimes enjoy. Second, there is the intra-masculine dimension. Incels in particular are fixated on their position vis-a-vis other men in dating and mating markets. They don’t simply resent the women whose attention, affection, and devotion they think they deserve; they also resent the other men who — in their eyes — receive this attention, affection, and devotion. Third, there is the the racial or xenophobic dimension. Many members of these social movements also harbor xenophobic and racist sentiments, and these are often expressed in terms of the so-called Great Replacement theory, which in these groups is manifested via objections to inter-racial marriage, higher birth-rates among non-white immigrants, and so on. If this is right, then the movements associated with the manosphere can be understood as fanatics in Katsafanas’s framework. They identify with a group, which they perceive to be threatened by the broader society that does not share their values. They unconditionally associate their group with sacred values in dominance hierarchies, which helps them hold onto a degree of psychic unity.[[3]](#footnote-2)

One striking features of these groups is their use of recent coinages and unfamiliar terms (e.g., ‘red pill’, ‘incel’, ‘hypergamy’, ‘black pill’, ‘chad’, ‘sperg’, ‘freeman’, ‘hyperborean’, ‘alpha’, ‘feminazi’, ‘femoid’, ‘gynocracy’, ‘monkeybranching’, ‘roastie’, ‘stacy’, ‘beta’, ‘blue pill’, ‘husbank’, ‘omega’, ‘orbiter’, ‘simp’, ‘cuck’, ‘sjw’, and ‘white knight’). Our contention is that the men who coopt and coin these terms do so in an attempt to make better sense of their own experiences and lives. They then put them out into the manosphere, where they can be discussed, adapted, and adopted, in much the same way that hermeneutical resources in more palatable activist movements coin, discuss, adapt, and adopt language to forge communal hermeneutic resources. Fricker (2007) and Medina (2013, especially chapter 3) discuss how such meaning-making is done by, for instance, feminist and racial justice movements. According to Medina (p. 95), this is done through engagement in “epistemic negotiations.” He maintains that it is important to “develop a dynamic and interactive view of epistemic activities that pays attention to (and traces the trajectory of) people’s responsiveness to each other’s contributions,” and that this involves “negotiating processes of mutual interrogation and the collaborative generation of meanings and interpretative possibilities.” We suggest that functionally the same process of meaning-making is engaged in not only by progressive social movements but also by retrogressive ones. Whereas liberationist movements collaborate to forge and renegotiate hermeneutic resources that enable them to make sense of and communicate their experiences both within their movements and to the rest of society, retrogressive movements collaborate to forge and renegotiate hermeneutic resources that systematically distort the social world but which are often interpreted and adopted in the same spirit of liberation. As we will see in more detail below, participants in the manosphere have a whole lexicon to characterize what they regard as their dark epiphany. Indeed, we think that manosphere groups have in many cases been more successful than liberationist movements in creating, negotiating, and in some cases appropriating hermeneutic resources, and that this case study in the dark side of conceptual engineering may be both sobering and informative.

Here is the plan for this chapter: we begin with a discussion of the role that concepts play in both individual and social life. This role means that which concepts are available to members of a population has the potential to influence both their aims and their behaviors. We then turn to conceptual engineering, which has risen to prominence in recent years. Working from highly-cited examples, we distinguish different types of conceptual engineering that aim to introduce, modify, or eliminate concepts. The engineering metaphor suggests that the people involved in these projects are not merely describing the world but changing it in some significant, large-scale way. We then ask what changes conceptual engineers — whether they are philosophers, other academics, or laypeople — may intend to effect. In particular, we distinguish ameliorative projects, which (aim to) improve the world in some way, from degenerative projects, which (aim to) make it worse. We contend that degenerative projects have been neglected by philosophers and that insights can be gleaned from studying the degenerative conceptual engineering that has taken place in the Anglophone manosphere in recent decades. The remainder of the paper delves into some of the details of this discourse and argues that the degenerative project both arrogates existing hermeneutic resources and forges new ones that are subsequently negotiated and injected into the rest of society.

# 2 Why concepts matter

Our psychology and practical engagement with the world is constrained by the concepts at our disposal. Importantly, as hermeneutical resources, concepts fix the thoughts that we can have (Burgess and Plunkett (2013). What is available for one to believe depends, in part, on the world presenting itself througha particular concept that one possesses. And the role of concepts in our mental lives is more than doxastic. Concepts play a sophisticated role in the formation of desire, prediction, judgment, and planning (Camp 2015). They also direct attention, control what we perceive as salient, and enable us to recognize lines of inquiry. Beyond this, concepts also constrain affective understanding, and even shape affective states themselves (Jones 2019). Arguably, whether one is in love depends on taking oneself to fall under that description: love depends on a concept of love (see Jones 2008; Kirsch 2019).

Given the role that concepts play in our cognition and affective processing, it’s clear that concepts undergird social interaction. An oft-cited passage from Burgess and Plunkett makes this connection explicit:

Arguably, our conceptual repertoire determines not only what beliefs we can have but also what hypotheses we can entertain, what desires we can form, what plans we can make on the basis of such mental states, and accordingly constrain what we can hope to accomplish in the world. *Representation enables action*, from the most sophisticated scientific research, to the most mundane household task. It influences our options within social/political institutions, and even helps determine which institutions are so much as thinkable. *Our social roles, in turn, help determine what kinds of people we can be, what sorts of lives we can lead* (2013, p. 1097 our emphasis).

To summarize, concepts shape our mental lives and this has implications for how we understand ourselves and others. Concepts frame expectation, undergird action, shape institutions, and constrain (our understanding of) moral, social, and political possibility. This serves as the basis of practical activity. We interpret the world in line with the concepts available to us, and we act in response to the world in accordance with our interpretation of it.

How can concepts do allof this? It’s important to distinguish two ways of thinking about concepts.

On one way of thinking, concepts are *semantic* entities.They are public linguistic meanings (intensions and extensions) of non-indexical terms, and typically thought to exist abstractly (Cappelen 2018).[[4]](#footnote-3) Call this *the semantic approach.*

On another way of thinking, concepts are *psychological bodies of information*, or knowledge structures – where ‘knowledge’ is understood non-factively. Call this *the psychological approach.* This way of approaching concepts is typical in the field of psychology. Psychologists tend to focus on the relationship between bodies of information and cognitive competencies. The primary goal is to “determine what kind of knowledge is used by default” in certain mental processes (Machery 2009, p. 34; see also Camp 2015; Fischer 2020; Isaac 2021). Importantly, such processes involve *classification* and *categorization.*

Using a hybrid of semantic and psychological approaches, we will analyze how certain groups in the manosphere develop conceptual practices for thinking about the world and setting norms for social engagement. On our view, many members of the manosphere are attempting to open up new avenues for thought, talk, and behavior, which involves grouping together individuals under novel or revised concepts (e.g., *Chad*, *Stacy*), associating knowledge structures with such individuals (e.g., affectively-laden attributions such as Chads are ‘alpha’), and developing new standards of interaction on the basis of category membership (e.g., alphas are dominant). We’ll say more about this below.

For now, we’ll discuss a recent field of philosophical methodology called *conceptual engineering.* Our goal is to show that philosophers have focused too narrowly on the ameliorative potential of conceptual innovation and have failed to recognise the ways that certain groups develop conceptual practices that frustrate efforts to achieve social justice.

# 3 Conceptual engineering

In its broadest sense, conceptual engineering is a form of *conceptual analysis.* However, it differs from traditional approaches insofar as it is not concerned with making explicit our intuitive grasp of necessary and sufficient conditions (e.g., Frege 1892; Peacocke 1992); nor it is (simply) concerned with empirical facts about ordinary linguistic usage. Instead, conceptual engineering tends to involve three stages of analysis: *evaluation, normativity,* and *strategic planning.* In many cases, conceptual engineers start by reflecting on an existing conceptual practice to make a judgment about whether it can be improved. If it is judged that a practice could be improved, the conceptual engineer makes a proposal or prescription for how to improve that practice. Finally, the conceptual engineer develops strategies for motivating the adoption of the improved practice in a particular domain of use (see Haslanger 2000; Burgess and Plunkett 2013; Cappelen 2018).[[5]](#footnote-4)

Conceptual engineering, on the semantic approach, is primarily about changing the meaning of a term or the content of a concept, which determines reference. This is an important project for many different reasons. Some of these reasons are distinctively moral, social, and political; others are more theoretical. As an example of the latter, Kevin Sharp (2013) has argued that our ordinary concept of truth cannot be assigned a consistent extension, and this leads us to certain paradoxes, such as the liar paradox. What Scharp argues is that, in certain theoretical contexts, we ought to replace the ordinary concept of truth with two proposed alternatives. We’ll say more about moral, social, and political conceptual engineering soon.

On the psychological approach, conceptual engineering is about changing non-semantic mental and linguistic facts. It aims to revise our knowledge structures — the psychological information we use by default in certain cognitive processes (Isaac 2021; Fischer 2020). Importantly, conceptual engineers of this stripe are concerned with revising these bodies of information for the purposes of inducing a change in our actual thinking and speaking dispositions, such as *how we classify and categorize the world* (Podosky 2018; cf. Nado 2021).

For example, such conceptual engineers do not aim at changing the meaning of, say, ‘marriage’ for same-sex inclusion, but rather their goal is to change widespread classification dispositions with the term ‘marriage.’ Disposition change is prioritized over changes to meaning (see also Koch 2021).

## 3.1 Types of conceptual engineering

There are at least four different ways to do conceptual engineering: *Introduction, Elimination, Revision,* and *Replacement.*[[6]](#footnote-5) *Introduction* involves creating a concept and instituting this creation within an existing repertoire of concepts. *Elimination*, by contrast, is conceptual engineering as demolition. It involves the removal of a concept from an existing repertoire. *Revision* is perhaps paradigm conceptual engineering. It is the engineering of an extant concept with the aim to improve it. And *Replacement* is about creating a new concept to swap out with another that is relevantly similar, but not the same.

A few things to note. First, surprisingly little has been said about *Elimination.* It is an important form given the social and political aims of certain ameliorative theorists who wish to trash certain concepts, such as racial eliminativists who believe that racial concepts do not correspond to anything in the world (Appiah 1992; Zack 2003). Given that the manosphere is replete with new but pernicious concepts, *Elimination* strategies will be vital for combating them.

Second, these projects are not separated by sharp boundaries. Often it will be unclear whether one is revising a concept or simply replacing it. This partially depends on one’s preferred theory of concept identity, which we won’t discuss here. [[7]](#footnote-6)

Third, conceptual engineering projects have different *scopes.* Some might only be interested in changing concepts for the purposes of theoretical inquiry (e.g., Scharp 2013); some might be interested in simply changing concepts in a context, such as the stipulation and uptake of speaker-meanings (e.g., Pinder 2021), or the modulation of concepts within conversation (e.g., Jorem 2021). Others have more ambitious goals, such as widespread conceptual change within entire communities (e.g., Haslanger 2000; Manne 2018).

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## 3.2 Ameliorative analysis

Why bother engaging in the engineering of concepts? We mentioned that there are often theoretical reasons, such as coming up against paradoxes. But this is not our concern here. Rather, we are concerned with conceptual engineering as a means to promote social justice*.* This is known as *ameliorative analysis* (Haslanger 2005, 2015).[[8]](#footnote-7)

Ameliorative analysis has a short but rich history. Beginning most explicitly with Sally Haslanger’s (2000) proposed alternative definition of *woman*, there has been a flurry of subsequent work where theorists have offered new, or revised, ways of thinking about a particular subject matter. The goal of Haslanger’s project was to provide a definition of ‘woman’ that embedded within it the oppression and subordination of women, with the aim of serving the interests of feminist inquiry and activism. After this came Robin Dembroff’s (2016) amelioration of *sexual orientation*; Elisabeth Barnes’s (2016) proposal of *disability*; Kathrine Jenkin’s (2016) trans inclusive account of *woman*; and Kate Manne’s (2018) revisionary analysis of *misogyny*. It is now somewhat standard practice in race and gender theorizing to consider not just what concepts our terms express, but rather what they ought to express given our social justice goals.

Exactly how each of these proposals works to promote social justice depends on the details of the project. However, there is a sense in which, generally speaking, the overall aim is to improve our moral, social, or political consciousness. What our embeddedness in ideological structures has done to our minds is shape them so that we either fail to see the world as it truly is (false consciousness) or else to see the world in a way that is far from optimal given our social justice goals. An example of the former is the kind of consciousness of race that assumes hierarchical biological essentialism (Appiah 1995; Zack 2002); an example of the latter is traditional or antiquated notions expressed by ‘marriage’. For conceptual engineering projects that aim to promote social justice, the ultimate goal is to either correct our minds so that we may readily see the facts or to develop new ways of thinking such that we move closer to achieving particular justice-oriented ends.

It’s worth noting that *a lot* needs to go right for conceptual engineering to deliver on the promise of promoting social justice (Podosky 2022). Notice the implicit presupposition regarding the scope of justice-oriented conceptual engineering. The goal is to change the thinking and speaking practices, and the behavior dispositions that such practices undergird, of entire communities, or, in many cases, the whole thinking and speaking world. How to get populations of this magnitude to change their thought and talk in conformity with a proposed concept is quite a task. This task is now formulated as a problem: *the implementation challenge of conceptual engineering.*

We don’t have the space to go through different ways of thinking about the implementation challenge. Suffice it to say that propagating a new or revised conceptual practice is considered an incredibly difficult endeavor among philosophers interested in justice-promoting conceptual engineering. However, it’s interesting to compare this to the relative ease that members of the manosphere have in the creation, development, and refinement of conceptual practices within their respective communities. This is not to say that for any concept proposed in the manosphere, it receives widespread uptake. Instead, the claim is that novel concepts, and ways of using them, seem to be able to flourish within such communities to the extent that particular groups in the manosphere, such as The Red Pill, have entire ‘handbooks’ that consist of a long list of concepts that hang together according to an internal, albeit gravely irrational, dangerous, and immoral, logic (see Squirrell and Sonnad 2017; Stack 2017).[[9]](#footnote-8)

## 3.3 **De**generative **analysis**

Conceptual engineering does not require that one *intend* to ameliorate a concept, and it does not require that one *in fact* ameliorates a concept (even if that is one’s intention).

Of course, if one undertakes *ameliorative analysis* then we might assume that one must have the intention to ameliorate a concept. However, ameliorative analysis, as we’re understanding it, is just one kind of conceptual engineering. One can be a conceptual engineer without aiming at promoting social justice (e.g. Scharp on *truth*); and one can be a conceptual engineer while aiming at making the world worse.

For an example of the latter, we could imagine that after a string of failed attempts to cause suffering in the world by threatening nuclear destruction, a Dr. Evil-type villain instead concocts a plan to brainwash people by introducing a set of concepts that shapes consciousness in a way such that people accept their on-going suffering as normal: instituting conventional ways of thinking of what it means to be a good citizen as someone who dedicates their whole life to work and disregards their personal relationships. Arguably this sort of conceptual assault is the heart of Nietzsche’s objection to Pauline Christianity — which he refers to as a revaluation of values — in *The Genealogy of Morals* and *The Antichrist*. A related concern seems to underlie the Confucian project of the rectification of names.

Only a few conceptual engineers have been interested in whether conceptual engineering can actually achieve its stated justice-oriented goals. Herman Cappelen (2018) worries that because we do not have control over the facts that determine the meaning of our words, conceptual engineering runs the risk of *meaning degeneration*:

The fact that conceptual engineering is inscrutable and out of our control means that it is also possible (sometimes I think even likely) that those who try to achieve good ends through conceptual engineering will end up causing harms they didn’t intend. We have no prima facie reason to think that the process is typically one that leads to amelioration rather than degeneration (2018, p. 159).

Though we might intend to do good by tinkering with our conceptual repertoire, we might actually do bad —at least accidentally. Podosky (2022, p. 13) puts this problem in terms of harmful consequences, by analogy with negative outcomes for farmers in attempts to achieve justice for non-human animals by revising our concept of food to exclude (non-lab grown) meat.

Teresa Marques (2020) also expresses the concern that our concepts can be *perverted.* This happens when a word that is used to refer to a particular reference class, and which invokes certain ways of thinking about the members of this class, is used in ways to refer to another reference class – and this is through forms of manipulation, either implicit or explicit. For example, Marques discusses how Nazi propaganda changed the reference of ‘fanatical’. The term ‘fanatical’ was used not to refer to a fringe group of radicals but to those who were considered heroes in their efforts to advance Nazi occupation of Europe. That is, the associative information about being fanatical, or at least some of it, was preserved despite a change in reference.

Both Cappelen and Marques show how conceptual engineering can produce negative effects. Projects of this kind we can call *degenerative analysis*. It can come in three forms: (1) an unintentional negative consequence of aiming at the good (Cappelen 2018); (2) an intentional effort to achieve an end that one mistakes as being good; (3) conceptual engineering that aims at the bad — which has not yet been discussed in the philosophical literature.

There are limitations to the kinds of degenerative analyses that Cappelen and Marques introduce. Cappelen seems to presuppose that a particular conceptual engineer knows what the good is, aims to promote it, but fails when they end up producing negative effects. Such degenerative analysis might be classified as negligent or even reckless. Cappelen discounts the possibility of conceptual engineering projects where one does not know what is in fact good, and therefore cannot aim to promote it — while still producing negative consequences. Such efforts would be even more negligent and reckless. Moreover, his account is restricted to the determinants of meaning, the semantic approach, rather than a more holistic explanation of the interplay between meaning and psychological bodies of information.

Teresa Marques does a better job. She focuses not only on semantics (i.e., reference) but also on the associative information that is attached to particular words. However, Marques falls short on explaining the possibility of degenerative analysis with respect to all types of conceptual engineering projects. Marques is only interested in the *perversion* of meanings, so her concern is solely with *Revision* and plausibly *Replacement.* But degenerative analysis can involve *Introduction* and *Elimination.* Rather than perverting existing meanings, degenerative analysis can introduce new, or eliminate old, conceptual practices in ways that produce harmful consequences or corrupt our understanding.

How does this relate to fanaticism in the manosphere? It should be noted that there is basically no philosophical work on degenerative analysis in the real world, except for the few examples offered by Marques. If it is mentioned, it is done so in a highly abstract way (e.g., Podosky 2022). We’re interested in how conceptual engineering happens in the wild. Specifically, we’ll explore the *degenerative analyses* that occur within the contemporary manosphere.

One might think that members of the manosphere, by inducing new ways of thinking and speaking, are either (i) attempting to engage in some kind of ameliorative analysis, albeit in a perniciously confused way, or else they are (ii) trying to change conceptual practices, in their community or in the broader population, in order to make the world worse. In the following section, we’ll explore (i) and (ii) more closely.

# 4 The dark side of conceptual engineering

The term ‘incel’, short for ‘involuntary celibate’, was coined by a bisexual Canadian woman named Alana in the early 1990s.[[10]](#footnote-9) She started a blog and message board (Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Project, which is no longer available online) where she and others could try to make sense of their experiences and perspective together. Over time, the message board came to be heavily populated by aggressive, complaining men. Meanwhile, Alana had become more socially confident and sexually fulfilled. She no longer identified as an incel, so she turned over control of the message board to a stranger.

Years later, the lonely, angry, mostly white men who had flocked to her board had become a global social movement, adopting and perverting Alana’s coinage, which was initially intended as a talisman to be used by an inclusive community. They congregated on Reddit message boards and elsewhere, continuing the hermeneutic work of making sense of their experiences and perspectives but turning to dark, conspiratorial, and sometimes-violent imaginings. A touchstone of the incel movement was Elliot Rodger, a California man who committed a series of misogynistic terrorist assaults and murders in Isla Vista in 2014 before committing suicide. Before his killing spree, Rodger released an autobiographical manifesto titled “My Twisted World.” In previous work, we have analyzed this manifesto and compared it to other writing produced by members of manosphere communities such as Men Going Their Own Way, various men’s rights activists, masculinist supremacists such as the Lad’s Society, and the manifesto of Brenton Tarrant, the fascist Christchurch shooter (Roose et al. 2022; Alfano et al. 2022). While Rodger does not use the term ‘incel’ in his manifesto, he described himself using this term on various online message boards, and the manifesto includes such self-descriptions as, “condemned to live a life of lonely celibacy,” “lonely celibate life,” and “suffering my miserable, lonely, celibate life.” Rodger has become a sort of patron saint and inspiration for other misogynistic incels, including some like Alek Minassian who went on to commit multiple murders.[[11]](#footnote-10)

The example of Alana’s coinage of the term ‘incel’ and its subsequent uptake are instructive when thinking about degenerative analysis. It seems clear that Alana intended the coinage as part of an ameliorative analysis (though of course, not one aimed at a philosophical audience or published in little-read academic journals). But of course, no one person can fix the public meaning of a term through sheer act of will. And when Alana turned over control of her message board, she relinquished any semantic or hermeneutic authority or power she may have had in the growing global incel community. She later told a reporter that, when she learned of Rodger’s shootings and his identification as an incel, her reaction was, “Holy shit. Look what I started.” And she told her friends that she felt like “a scientist who invented something that ended up being a weapon of war, I can’t uninvent this word, nor restrict it to the nicer people who need it.” What seems to have happened to ‘incel’ is what Medina (2013, p. 101) calls “*counter-interpretations* that systematically distort” original communicative intentions. Alana’s coinage thus falls into category (i) above. She attempted an ameliorative analysis (and in all likelihood helped some people, herself included), but she also created a hermeneutic resource that was annexed and — to use a military metaphor — subject to dual use.

The resentful men like Rodger and Minassian who arrogated the term ‘incel’ did so as part of a broader social movement that also took over and perverted other existing hermeneutic resources and coined and circulated new ones of their own. Naturally, with any large, diffuse social movement, it is hopeless to attribute a single intentional profile to all incels. However, we can track the creation and evolution of some prominent hermeneutic resources in this community and observe how they are forged, circulated, reworked, and injected into the broader culture. At least some actors in this social process are, we contend, engaged in degenerative analysis that falls into category (ii) above. Below, we offer some examples.

## 4.1 Arrogated hermeneutic resources

In this section, we document some of the hermeneutic resources arrogated by incels and other members of the broader manosphere. While the meaning of the relevant terms and concepts is contested and constantly under renegotiation, we can at least get a snapshot of dominant understandings by examining common usage and the most upvoted definitions on [www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com). Urban Dictionary may be the closest thing the manosphere has to the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*. When this chapter was being authored, the top definition of ‘incel’ was:

short for “involuntary celibate”. often built like a discord mod, probably uses reddit, gets no bitches, says the hard r while being whiter than Wonder Bread, smells like Axe body spray and/or B.O., plays COD, and makes overused “i identify as an attack helicopter” jokes. has never felt the touch of another woman except that of his mother when she handed him snackies as a child.

This “official” definition from within the manosphere is highly derogatory while also demonstrating insider knowledge of the online world incels inhabit. Discord is a voice, video, and text platform favored by gamers, including those who (like Elliot Rodger) spend a lot of time playing World of Warcraft (or, as in this definition, COD, which stands for Call of Duty). A mod is a moderator on Discord or some other platform, and is stereotypically overweight and perpetually at their computer. The definition also points to the three dimensions of social dominance mentioned above: inter-gender, intra-masculine (via reference to the transphobic attack helicopter joke), and racial (via reference to the hard r).

Another arrogated hermeneutic resource in this space is the red pill / blue pill metaphor. In *The Matrix* movie trilogy, the protagonist Neo is offered a choice between taking a red pill or a blue pill. If he takes the blue pill, he goes back to his normal, seemingly happy life. If he takes the red pill, the horrible truth of his existence as a slave will be revealed. When the first *Matrix* movie was released, taking the red pill was interpreted by many as a modernization of Plato’s allegory of the cave. In the broader culture, taking the red pill came to be understood as any kind of horrifying epiphany. In the manosphere, the term is used to refer to the realization that society is structured in such a way that a certain population of men is doomed to sexual frustration (a projection of the Pareto principle onto sexual relations), that feminist attitudes and policies enforce this unjust social structure, and that non-white foreigners are out-competing whites in fertility and will soon replace them.[[12]](#footnote-11) Ironically, Lilly and Lana Wachowski, the makers of *The Matrix,* have subsequently revealed that taking the red pill was intended to represent the experience of coming out of the closet as trans.[[13]](#footnote-12) Like Alana, the coiner of ‘incel’, the Wachowskis are not in a position to dictate the meaning of the terms they invented.

A third example of an arrogated hermeneutic resource is the alpha / beta distinction. Originally, the distinction was used only in animal ethology to distinguish between males that enjoyed or lacked various privileges such as mating and territory, but over time it began to be applied to humans as well (Hawley et al. 2008). The introduction of the distinction to the human context tends to be attributed to Frans de Waal (1982), who was amplified by the pundit and conspiracy theorist Naomi Wolf, who injected the distinction into popular discourse.[[14]](#footnote-13) As it is used in the manosphere, the distinction between alphas and betas picks out stereotypes of conventionally attractive and conventionally unattractive men. Women are assumed to be attracted only to alphas, who tend to be dominant and domineering, but women are also stereotyped as being willing to form temporary attachments with betas in order to exploit them financially. As we will see in more detail below, another manosphere term for the alpha stereotype is ‘Chad’. The dominance relationship between the alpha/Chad and the beta is thought to be mediated through women’s preferences and behavior. For instance, in a corpus from Men Going Their Own Way, we find the following sentiment expressed: “Chad plays while Beta pays.”

Across these examples, we see that participants in the manosphere have adopted hermeneutic resources they found ready-to-hand in fringe (‘incel’), popular (‘red pill’/‘blue pill’), and elite academic (‘alpha’/‘beta’) discourse, and through a discursive social process renegotiated and put their stamp on the meaning of these resources. The originators of these terms are not in a position to dictate what they mean once they have been released into the world, and those most devoted to establishing control of the resources are capable of doing so via persistent and strategic efforts to inject their preferred meanings into the discourse.

## 4.2 Parasitic hermeneutic resources

Beyond directly arrogating hermeneutic resources, participants in the manosphere create and disseminate new ones in two ways. In some cases, the new resources are inspired by or based on existing hermeneutic resources. Without a pre-existing nexus of conceptual and linguistic resources, these new ones would not be sensible or attractive. In other cases, the resources are de novo. Crafting and securing uptake for the latter type of hermeneutic resources may be more challenging because they cannot take advantage of the social meanings attached to existing hermeneutical resources that a community has a history of coordinating around. However, as we show below, many have enjoyed some success among incel and other manosphere communities. In this section, though, we focus on the former.

One example is the ‘black pill’ / ‘blackpill’. According to the currently most-favored definition on urban dictionary, it is defined thus:

The Blackpill is basically the ultimative and hardest to swallow Redpill.

It is about realizing nothing matters and there is nothing you can do that will change anything, it depraves [sic.] you of all positive thought and makes you want to get some sort of meaning out of this limited time we have.

Basically extreme nihilism. That’s why its [sic.] not a called a red pill, since beyond that.

As this definition indicates, this phrase is inspired by the arrogated redefinition of the red pill from the *Matrix* movies. It refers to an especially dark epiphany or transformative experience that not only changes someone’s representation of the world but also their motivational set. Were it not for the prior annexation of the red pill / blue pill distinction, this coinage would be senseless.

Another derived hermeneutical resource is the ‘omega’ classification. As we saw above, the manosphere appropriated the alpha / beta distinction from ethology and projected it onto humans. As the naming of COVID virus variants has demonstrated, once some Greek letters are being used, people can’t help using more of them. Whereas ‘alpha’ names the first letter of the Greek alphabet and ‘beta’ the second, ‘omega’ names the last. Combining alpha and omega has tempted propagandists at least since John of Patmos authored the book of *Revelation*. Incels and other participants in the manosphere have followed in his footsteps by labeling the ultimate betas — weak, subordinated, submissive — as omegas. According to one poster in our MGTOW corpus, “the omega for example is the loser, he is the last to eat, get [sic.] beaten up by the alpha, the beta and the females also.”

More recently, the Greek lexicon was expanded to include the so-called ‘sigma’ male.[[15]](#footnote-14) The archetype is related to the alpha but allegedly remains aloof from social hierarchies and society more generally. As such, the sigma is both desirable and hard-to-get, making him an especially tempting object of emulation. Novel but derivative hermeneutic resources such as ‘omega’ and ‘sigma’ not only inform people’s conceptions of the world and themselves but also influence their motivational sets and behavioral dispositions. Even if they are to some extent mythical, they still serve as lodestars by which at least some participants in the manosphere guide their actions.[[16]](#footnote-15)

Yet another derivative hermeneutic resource in this space is that of the ‘volcel’, which is short for ‘voluntary celibate’ and parasitic on the ‘incel’ coinage. This term is especially popular among MGTOW and seems to be associated with both gender-based resentment and an insistence on agency. The volcel, as a figure, could have sex — including with attractive women — but chooses not to. The choice to disengage from sexual and romantic relations with women is framed in terms of independence and self-reliance (cf. the ‘sigma’ archetype). Of course, one might question whether self-described volcels enjoy the sexual affordances that they claim, but part of their self-mythologizing at least involves this reclamation of agency, which fits neatly into Katsafanas’s definition of fanaticism.[[17]](#footnote-16)

In the interest of saving word count, we will not explore other parasitic hermeneutics in as much detail. But to give a quick impression of some of them, we mention ‘white knight’, ‘divorce rape’, and ‘feminazi’. The white knight trope has its origins in Irish heraldry, was popularized by Lewis Carol in *Through the Looking Glass*, and has come to be associated in the manosphere with men who pretend to stand up for women and women’s rights only in order to garner affection and sexual favors from grateful women. Men who have gone through the redpill or blackpill transformation understand that no other man would look out for women or their rights without an ulterior motive, so they use this term to cynically label other men as hypocrites. In MGTOW circles, ‘divorce rape’ is used to refer to the financial burden that women impose on their ex-husbands through the legal system — analogizing the sexual crime of rape with seeking alimony. The term ‘feminazi’ was popularized by right-wing AM radio commentator Rush Limbaugh. It is a portmanteau of ‘feminist’ and ‘nazi’, and is commonly used in the manosphere to associate the feminist movement with authoritarianism.

As the reader might expect, there are many more parasitic coinages that we could discuss in this context, but we hope that the point is clear: participants in the manosphere don’t just arrogate existing terms and phrases, they also exploit the metaphoric space of existing social imaginaries to construct new stereotypes, archetypes, and intentional and behavioral profiles. In so doing, they make it possible for themselves and others to classify people and actions into these types and profiles, as well as to aspire to emulate some profiles and not others — even if the profiles in question are not embodied by any actual humans. These hermeneutical resources may remain confined to the manosphere, but they can also spill over into the wider culture. And when they are more broadly adopted, we observe degenerative conceptual engineering that overcomes the implementation problem and operates at scale.

## 4.3 De novo hermeneutic resources

Beyond the arrogated and inspired hermeneutic resources discussed above, novel terms have been coined by participants in the manosphere both to make sense of their experiences and to hurl as pejoratives at both men and women they see as their oppressors. Perhaps the best known of these de novo terms are the ‘Chad’ / ‘Stacy’ / ‘Becky’ triad. ‘Chad’ refers to the stereotypical alpha discussed above and has been in circulation for about a decade. As with the Greek alphabet terms, ‘Chad’ seems to have inspired follow-on coinages: first ‘Stacy’, the archetypal sorority girl who obsessed incels like Elliot Rodger, and derivatively ‘Becky’, the archetypal female beta.[[18]](#footnote-17) Once a named character exists in the manosphere’s social imaginary, the temptation is strong to invent and name new counterpart characters. For instance, our MGTOW corpus, the character ‘Tyrone’ is conceptualized as a Black Chad: “Less women getting pregnant and getting on welfare because Chad/Tyrone can’t be found to pay child support (which is fine by me ’cause less welfare means a lower income tax).”

Other de novo hermeneutic resources in this space seem to be aimed at solidifying and giving expression to other aspects of the red pill ideology. For instance, the notion that beta men tend to be financially exploited grounds the portmanteau ‘husbank’ (‘husband’ + ‘bank’), which we find in our MGTOW corpus: “In a whopping 35% of marriage 2.0 contracts, the husbank earns $30,000 or more than the goodwife.” Relatedly, the phrase ‘monkey branching’ is used metaphorically to express the idea that women are constantly looking to level up from their current partner to a different one who is either more physically attractive or wealthier: “The best thing that ever happened to me is that my ex succeeded in monkey branching way up the tree to billionaire levels. I have no expenses putting my son through college.” And the notion that sexual and romantic relationships are never grounded in genuine love and affection but rather in financial exploitation via the legal system is expressed by the portmanteau ‘spermjacking’ (‘sperm’ + ‘hijack’): “Expect spermjacking to become ever more common (vasectomy for the win). And expect the laws to get even worse, because the government doesn’t want to support their [women’s] retirements either.”

Crucially, the popularity and public meaning of these words and phrases is debated and negotiated as they are being injected into manosphere discourse and sometimes also popular discourse. We have already observed some of the downstream outcomes of this discursive process in the definitions from Urban Dictionary. The discussion occurs both in person and — increasingly — online in spaces such as Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan. One telling piece of evidence for this claim is the prominence of the ‘AWALT’ and ‘NAWALT’ abbreviations in the manosphere. These stand, respectively, for “all women are like that” and “not all women are like that.” To even begin making sense of these abbreviations, one must be aware of the charge that at least some women are “like that,” as well as what the demonstrative “that” refers to. It will not surprise our readers to hear that “that” refers to the constellation of psychological and behavioral dispositions associated with monkeybranching, spermjacking, and the broader redpill or blackpill ideology explored above. For instance, in our MGTOW corpus, we find, “as a heterosexual male, two decades of monk has taught me several things .. one, is that life actually begins .. post-awalt” (‘monk’ is a metaphor for the volcel lifestyle). Or consider, “If you don’t want a vasectomy, then don’t get one. But don’t complain when some little not-actually-a-nawalt nails you for 216+ monthly payments for a child that will never be yours because your bank balance popped up on her radar.” The universal quantifier built into the (N)AWALT abbreviation is intentionally provocative, and those who use it can be quite insistent that no evidence could sway them from their convictions: “HOW can ANY Women disprove MGTOW??? AWALT.”

# 5 Conclusion

In this chapter, we explored some of the ways in which fanatics in the anglophone manosphere have employed the tools that philosophers have associated with ameliorative conceptual engineering for nefarious purposes. Many participants in the social movements associated with the manosphere qualify as fanatics by Katsafanas’s lights because they are singularly obsessed with certain values, especially inter-gender, intra-gender, and racial dominance hierarchies. They also perceive these values to be under threat from feminists, liberals, and those who have no objection to immigration from predominantly non-white countries to predominantly white ones. To shore up their psychic integrity, the men in these groups resort to a form of degenerative conceptual engineering. They arrogate hermeneutic resources that might otherwise be used by their perceived enemies. They construct novel hermeneutic resources based on or inspired by the ones they arrogate. And they craft new resources de novo. If our analysis is on the right track, then philosophers concerned with conceptual engineering need to pay greater attention to the full range of its affordances. Moreover, they may garner insights into how to solve the so-called implementation problem by looking in detail at how degenerative analyses have succeeded while ivory-tower ameliorative ones have often enjoyed little uptake.

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1. For additional context on fanaticism, see Katsafanas (2022), Cassam (2022), and Carian (2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. This typology draws on Connell (2005), Connell & Messerschmidt (2005), Ging (2019), as well as our own prior work in Alfano et al. (2022) and Roose et al. (2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. See also Melo Lopes (forthcoming), who also argues that incels such as Rodger are prone to psychic disintegration if they do not receive the attention, affection, and devotion that they feel they deserve. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Cf. Sawyer (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. There is a division of labor amongst conceptual engineers insofar as different theorists only focus on one stage of analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Matthew Lindauer (2020) has argued that conceptual preservation is also a form of conceptual engineering. Sometimes we have good reasons to preserve existing concepts, such as when our existing concepts are more ‘fruitful’ for certain forms of inquiry rather than proposed alternatives. This is similar to concerns raised about ‘concept creep’ (Haslam et al. 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. These projects become more difficult to distinguish when people apply a term based on its emotive associations rather than its straight descriptive content. For more, see Stevenson (1938) on *persuasive definitions*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. This is perhaps a more narrow way of construing ameliorative analysis. As Catarina Dutilh Novaes says, “ameliorative analysis is a two-tiered process that starts with a thorough, critical examination of one’s purposes, and then proceeds to reformulate a concept in view of the purposes previously established” (2018, p. 1023). Nevertheless, the idea of an analysis being ‘ameliorative’ tends to be associated with the development of a conceptual practice with social justice ends. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. For a comprehensive glossary of alt-right terms, see [https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Alt-right\_ glossary](https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Alt-right_glossary) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. See url = < <https://www.elle.com/culture/news/a34512/woman-who-started-incel-movement/> >, accessed 23 July 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. See url = <[https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/toronto-van-attack-trial-postponed-again-alek- minassian-s-lawyer-confirms-1.4869252](https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/toronto-van-attack-trial-postponed-again-alek-minassian-s-lawyer-confirms-1.4869252) >, accessed 22 July 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. For a similar diagnosis of the so-called “Dark Enlightenment” advocated by the alt-right, see Aikin (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. See url = <[https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2020/08/the-matrix-trans-allegory- lilly-wachowski](https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2020/08/the-matrix-trans-allegory-lilly-wachowski) >, accessed 24 July 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. See url = < [http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,992464-2,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0%2C33009%2C992464-2%2C00.html) >, both accessed 24 July 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. See url = <[https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/what-is-a-sigma-male-the-so- called-rarest-man](https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/what-is-a-sigma-male-the-so-called-rarest-man) >, accessed 25 July 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. For more on the theme of emulation of eponymous archetypes, see Alfano (2019, chapter 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. The resonance with *Genealogy of Morals*, essay 2, section 13, is striking. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. See url = < <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/chad> >, accessed 25 July 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)