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Implementing Conceptual Engineering: Lessons from Social Movements

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Abstract

Communication strategies to shape public opinion can be applied to the philosophical program of conceptual engineering. I propose to look for answers to the implementation challenge for conceptual engineering on similar challenges that arise in other contexts, such as that of social movements. I claim that conceptual engineering is successfully practiced in other areas with direct consequences on the political landscape, and that we can apply to philosophy what we might learn from those successful practices. With that end in mind, I explain the psychological approach to conceptual engineering. I present what has been called “the implementation challenge”, which is the problem that emerges from the possibility of control over the content of our concepts. The challenge consists in that if there is not such a control, conceptual engineering is not implementable. Then, I review some of the reactions that have been given to that challenge, and I defend the feasibility of conceptual engineering appealing to the collective action frames that social movements endorse as an instance of a successful kind of conceptual engineering and derive some strategies that might be of use for conceptual engineering in philosophy. Finally, I reply to some anticipated objections to my proposal.

Keywords: conceptual engineering, implementation challenge, social movements, collective action frames

Word count: 4,172

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They say, “holiday home”; we say, “vacation rental”, as it is a tourism activity such as that of hotel managers. They say, “home sharing”; we say “hotelization”, as you turn your home into a hotel. They say, “economic diversification”, but it is “touristification”, as it is more of the same, it is more tourism. They say, “collaborative economy”; but, looking at the numbers, this is “speculative economy”.

The quote above is from the documentary “All inclusive” (Col·lectiu Tot Inclòs, 2018). In that documentary Professor Joaquin Valdivielso criticizes the communication strategies of vacation rental agencies to garner favorable public opinion. This is a similar practice to that which Frank Ian Luntz famously advocated for to encourage the use of the term “death tax” instead of “estate tax”, and “climate change” instead of “global warming”. And it is also similar to the practice of some environmental movements which fight for what they have called “climate justice”. Indeed, according to communications consultant Luntz, his task consists in “testing language and finding words that will help his clients sell their product or turn public opinion on an issue or a candidate”¹, which can oddly be put in relation to the philosophical program of conceptual engineering. However, the relation between the communication strategies of interest groups who aim to shape public opinion and the feasibility questions of the conceptual engineers has, to my knowledge, never been drawn.

In this paper, I apply the communication strategies to shape public opinion to the philosophical program of conceptual engineering. More specifically, I propose to look for answers to the implementation challenge for conceptual engineering on similar challenges that arise in other contexts, such as that of social movements. My thesis is twofold: I claim

¹ PBS. (2004, November 9). *Interview: Frank Luntz*.
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/persuaders/interviews/luntz.html>

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that conceptual engineering is successfully practiced in other areas with direct consequences on the political landscape, and that we can apply to philosophy what we might learn from those successful practices. With that end in mind, in section 1 I explain the psychological approach to conceptual engineering. From this perspective, I present in section 2 what has been called “the implementation challenge”, which is the problem that emerges from the possibility of control over the content of our concepts. The challenge consists in that if there is not such a control, conceptual engineering is not implementable. In section 3, I review some of the reactions that have been given to that challenge. In section 4, I defend the feasibility of conceptual engineering in a new way: I appeal to the collective action frames that social movements endorse as an instance of a successful kind of conceptual engineering and derive some strategies that might be of use for conceptual engineering in philosophy. Finally, in section 5, I reply to some anticipated objections to my proposal.

The psychological approach to conceptual engineering

Conceptual engineering is the method that recently has been argued as the one that philosophers should focus on. Conceptual engineering consists in assessing the content of our concepts and prescribe what content those should have (Cappelen, 2020; Cappelen & Plunkett, 2020). Given that our concepts could have different content, we need to make sure that our concepts have the best content as possible (Cappelen, 2020). The criteria to assess the content of our concepts might be scientific, and hence concepts might be assessed according to their explanatory power, or their fruitfulness; and they could also be practical or moral, and hence concepts might be assessed according to their implicit discriminations, or moral consequences.

The kind of conceptual engineering with scientific goals draws from Carnapian explication (Dutilh-Novaes, 2020; Machery, 2017). According to Carnap, explication is

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the process through which we revise a vague, informal concept into a more exact one. The requirements that to fulfill in explicating a concept should be similarity, exactness, fruitfulness, and simplicity. A common illustration of this kind of conceptual engineering is the famous Fisch-Piscis example. Because the term fish induced to error in scientific practice, zoologists artificially constructed the concept “piscis” for their scientific practice. Therefore, they avoided the connotations of the folk-concept “fish” (Dutilh-Novaes, 2020). Another example of this kind of conceptual engineering might be the revision of the concept “innateness” (Griffiths et al., 2009).

On the other hand, the kind of conceptual engineering with practical goals draws from Haslanger’s ameliorative analysis (Dutilh-Novaes, 2020; Haslanger, 2000; Machery, 2017). According to Haslanger, the concepts related to gender and race should be revised so that they do not promote further discrimination. A common example of this practically oriented conceptual engineering is that of Haslanger (2000) on the concept of “woman”. According to her, the content of our concept of woman has undesirable social and political effects, hence her proposal to ameliorate them. She proposes to replace the content of our concept of “woman” with another content that better serves the fight for social justice.

Despite its recent explicit defense, conceptual engineering is not a new method in philosophy (Cappelen & Plunkett, 2020; Deutsch, 2020). The belief that our concepts are not ideal has largely been advocated for in philosophy. The way that philosophers have normally proceed is through armchair philosophy; they have tended to assess their concepts through the method of cases, which resorts to our intuitions on whether something counts as an instance of the term under study. However, recent findings from experimental philosophy have casted doubts on the traditional method of cases. According to Machery (2017), the unusual situations proposed in the method of cases elicit judgments which are unreliable, and divergent, as they are influenced by

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demographic and presentation effects. Therefore, he argues, philosophers should reorient their efforts to naturalized conceptual analysis, or an empirically grounded conceptual engineering. Accordingly, philosophers should use empirical tools to describe our concepts, and assess their validity. If our concepts prove invalid, because they lead to erroneous inferences, then philosophers should prescribe what content our concepts should have.

In agreement with his empirical approach to the assessment of our concepts, Machery (2017) proposes a psychological view of concepts. According to him, concepts are bodies of information; they are subsets of belief-like states which are retrieved by default from the long-term memory. The subset of beliefs that constitute the content of a concept is retrieved quickly, automatically, and independently of the context, and it has a main role in our reasoning. For instance, the concept of a dog is that set of beliefs that we retrieve by default when we think of a dog.

From this psychological approach, conceptual engineering might be described as aiming to identify the subset of beliefs that we should adopt when we think about something. It is a program to reform our concepts, that is, to replace the old beliefs that used to constitute a concept for new ones. These new beliefs are expected to make the concept more valid both in scientific and philosophical research, and regarding its practical and moral consequences.

The implementation challenge

A problem for conceptual engineering that have gained recognition in the last years is the implementation challenge (Cappelen & Plunkett, 2020; Deutsch, 2020). The implementation challenge is the problem that conceptual engineers face when they need

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to carry out the conceptual revisions that they have prescribed; it is the challenge that comes from the possibility of control over the content of our concepts.

Conceptual engineering can take place through different strategies (Cappelen & Plunkett, 2020). One strategy is to introduce a new concept whose content better satisfies our goals. The introduction of new concepts does not seem to pose any challenge to the way in which we use concepts. Therefore, this strategy does not face the implementation challenge. Yet there are two other strategies that are indeed susceptible of the implementation problem. Those two strategies are either replacing the content of an old concept for new content, preserving the same lexical term, or adding some content to a concept, preserving its old content. The implementation problem emerges in cases of replacement of concept or adding content in combination to an old content.

The project of conceptual engineering assumes that concepts might change their content (Cappelen, 2020), and that we can control that change (Deutsch, 2020). This problem has been typically addressed as a debate in meta-semantics (Deutsch, 2020). Philosophers interested in this problem have debated whether externalist or internalist views of meaning can account for the possibility of control over change of meaning (Cappelen, 2020; Cappelen & Plunkett, 2020; Deutsch, 2020). According to the externalists, meaning depends in part on facts that have to do with the history of the concept. The implementation challenge emerges in the externalist picture because we do not have control over introductory events, or chains of reference. On the other hand, according to the internalists, meaning depends on facts about the individuals. In this view, the implementation problem emerges because we do not have control over supervenience, that is, we cannot control how meaning emerges from our complex use-patterns (Cappelen, 2020).

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Yet another way to approach this topic is from a psychological angle: given our cognitive capacities regarding the use of concepts, and given the psychological understanding of concepts, we might question whether it is feasible to change the content of our concepts. To distinguish this psychological dimension of the problem from the meta-semantic one, Machery (2021) proposes to call this empirical question “the feasibility question” (p.1).

From that psychological approach, which has also been acknowledged in the discussion in meta-semantics (Deutsch, 2021; Koch, 2021), Machery (2021) argues that the psychological nature of some concepts is what makes it hard to revise them. According to him, some of our most used concepts are “attractors”, that is, our mind is pulled to use them with some specific content, and hence the efforts of conceptual engineers must be in vain. Although Machery does not claim that conceptual engineering might be impossible to implement because of some general feature of our concepts, he considers that the task of conceptual engineers faces strong difficulties because of the nature of our cognitive capacities.

Some replies to the challenge

The replies to the implementation challenge have centered around the topic of control over meaning. These discussions have been framed in meta-semantics and have focused on the possibility of intentional conceptual change. One skeptical reply comes from Deutsch (2020). According to him, the implementation challenge poses a serious threat to the project of conceptual engineering. Because by stipulation we cannot change the meaning of a term, the project of conceptual engineering is not implementable. He goes further arguing that what all those conceptual engineers can attain to is to change how speakers *use* the concept. Yet, according to his meta-semantic view, this does not affect the meaning of the concept.

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In response to Deutsch, Koch (2021) proposes another way to face the implementation challenge. According to him, the best way to change the content of a concept is convincing members of a group to use that term as constituted by the new content that wants to be added. “If they reach enough people and remain consistent, then this will eventually change the term’s semantic meaning” (p.2285). Yet Deutsch (2021) is not convinced by this reply because of the strong line that he draws between semantic meaning, and speaker meaning.

Other replies to the implementation challenge have acknowledged the difficulty to solve the problem and have provided alternatives to improve our use of concepts. Cappelen (2020) identifies two scopes for conceptual engineering: large scale, and small scale. Drawing an analogy with political and sociological analyses, he acknowledges the ineffectiveness of conceptual engineering in the global scale and defends its effectiveness in the small scale. Cappelen does not mention it, but this could be supported with Carnap’s “Fish-Piscis” example mentioned in section 1.

Finally, some proposals have resorted to cognitive science to look for an answer on whether we can deliberately influence the content of our concepts. Consequently, empirical tools might assist conceptual engineering not only in the description, and assessment of the content of our concepts, but also in finding the best way to reform them. Following this trend, Machery (2021) proposes to use empirical tools to assess which concepts are worth a revision, and which concepts should rather be eliminated and substituted by new ones. The judgment on which concepts are worth revising depends on the nature of those, that is, it depends on whether those concepts are attractors.

My proposal builds up on Machery’s one. Given that a plausible cause of the implementation problem is our cognitive capacity, I propose to resource to cognitive science not only to assess which concepts are more suitable for conceptual engineering,

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as Machery proposes, but also to find new ways to implement it. With that aim in mind I propose to look for evidence of successful conceptual engineering in social movements.

The collective action frames in social movements

Preliminary evidence of a sort of “conceptual engineering” in a large-scale might come from the concepts that are modified by social movements. Some examples might be found in the communication strategies that favored the use of “death tax” instead of “estate tax”, “climate change” instead of “global warming”, or even on the proliferated use of “climate justice”. Is there a relevant difference between the role of groups of interest, and social movements in shaping public opinion and conceptual engineering? Because of the resemblance between conceptual engineering, and the elaboration of frames by social movements, I appeal to the collective action frames that social movements endorse as an instance of a successful kind of conceptual engineering. I use this case to derive some strategies that might be of use for conceptual engineers in philosophy, especially when they face the implementation challenge.

The communication strategies of some groups of interest that aim to shape the public opinion are based on “framing theory”. Framing theory is used in sociology to conceptualize the meaning construction that is carried out by social movements (Benford & Snow, 2000). Social movements do not only carry existing ideas and concepts, but they also produce and maintain those ideas and concepts, and they also challenge the old frames; a practice that has been called “the politics of signification” (Snow & Benford, 1988). All this activity about ideas and concepts results in “collective action frames”. Collective action frames are “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p.614). They have clear practical goals: to create a shared understanding of

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a situation that needs to change, to articulate a way to change it, and to motivate adherents to the social movement.

In the terms that I have used in this paper, one might say that collective action frames are a kind of conceptual engineering practice that seeks to influence the content of the people's concepts to encourage social movement. The frames that emerge from social movements defeat the old frames because of their social and political consequences. Accordingly, the introduction of the concept "climate justice" emerges from a specific analysis of the environmental situation, it seeks to defend that view of the situation against an old and predominant analysis, and it promotes a course of action that follows from that analysis.

The reasons that explain why a collective action frame might be successful will give us insights that might be of use in our way to solve the implementation problem. According to Snow & Benford (1988), the success of a collective action frame comes from two sets of interacting factors: credibility, and salience of the proffered frame.

As for the credibility set, first, the proposed frame needs to have frame consistency, as the frame must be consistent in their system of beliefs, and in their proposed actions. Second, the proposed frame must have empirical credibility, that is, as there must be a fit between the framing and the world. This also entails that the inferences that might be drawn from the frames must be susceptible of empirical verification. Finally, the proposed frame must be defended by persuasive articulators. Therefore, the greater the consistency, the empirical credibility of the frame, and the credibility of its defendants the more chances of success.

On the other hand, as for the relative salience set, the frames need to have centrality for the people that seeks to engage. Accordingly, the proposed frames must give a central

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role to those values that people place at the center of their set of values. Second, the frame needs to have experiential commensurability, as the agents must be able to identify with the values it promotes. And, finally, the frame must have narrative fidelity, that is, people must be able recognize elements of their culture in the proposed frame.

All these general features might be worth seeking when conceptual engineers revise their concepts. Besides, and more specifically, it is worth considering that collective action frames acknowledge the active role of the audience (Benford & Snow, 2000). How the target audience will receive the information has a strong impact on the success of the frame. And this is particularly related to the implementation problem.

One of the strategies that collective action frames follow is taking advantage of the features of our cognitive systems. They particularly use the framing effect. In cognitive science, the framing effect consists in that how something is presented influences how people will cognitively process it. A common example of this effect is that people might endorse policies that do not contribute to the public good only because those policies have been presented in a way that emphasized their positive features (Druckman, 2001). Some reasons for why this happens is that we give more weight to negative loss than to positive gain, hence we avoid negative loss, and seek positive gain (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). The availability heuristic, and the affect heuristic also contribute to the framing effect: we give more weight to that information that we can retrieve easily, and to that information that has an emotional impact on us (Pachur et al., 2012).

Consequently, the success of some collective action frames might be due to their use of the framing effect. In other words, the framing effect influences the content that people will retrieve in using a concept. The processes that contribute to such effect are wired in our cognitive structures: our tendencies to avoid loss and to give more weight to

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accessible, and emotionally laden information. Accordingly, the concept “death tax” might be easy to introduce in our reasoning because of their strong emotional component.

Discussion

One might object that the aim of collective action frames, and the strategies of other groups of interest when they influence the content of our concepts is not to produce knowledge, but to shape public opinion and to promote social movements. Yet, as we have seen in section 1, the aims of conceptual engineering do not need to be scientific. They can also be practical, as it is the case of Haslanger’s ameliorative analysis of the concepts of gender and race. Consequently, the fact that collective action frames aim at practical goals is not a reason to reject them as instances of conceptual engineer.

Another objection might come from the observation that groups that aim to shape public opinion take advantage of our psychological biases, and flaws. Accordingly, those critics might argue, because this strategy seems to be out of reach for conceptual engineers, there is nothing that we can learn from politics that applies to conceptual engineering. However, the implementation challenge precisely comes from our cognitive flaws. As we have seen in section 2, our reluctance to change the content of our concepts might be ingrained in our cognitive structure. Given that the source of the problem lies in our cognitive, it seems reasonable to take advantage of that very same cognition to solve the implementation problem. I do not see any reason for why conceptual engineers should refrain from taking advantage of framing theories, both in cognitive science and in sociology, to promote their revision of concepts.

Finally, it might be argued that collective action frames emerge from collective action. Accordingly, they should not be considered as instances of intentional conceptual change, rather this change in our concepts should be understood as a side-effect of the action of

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the social movement. Although this might be the case for some collective action frames (Benford & Snow, 2000), it does not need to be the case for all the projects that aim to shape public opinion. We started this paper with examples from the communication strategies followed by vacation rental agencies, and communications consultants. The conceptual engineering carried out in the concepts “home sharing” or “climate change” is rather intentional, and it has some specific goals in mind. To what extent those concepts are merely introduced by stipulation, and hence they do not pose an implementation challenge, or whether they are revised on the bases of old concepts is a question that deserves further research.

Conclusion

Regardless of the details, it seems that revision of the content of our concepts has worked in other areas outside philosophy. Consequently, we have reasons to believe that the implementation challenge is surmountable, and that we can learn about successful strategies that have worked in those areas. I have proposed the case of collective action frames as instances of conceptual engineering aim at political goals, and I have showed how some of their strategies might be useful for conceptual engineering in philosophy.

It is true that in most of the cases that we have seen what has succeeded is the introduction of new terms, rather than revision of the old ones. As Cappelen (2020) notices, one might prefer to maintain a lexical term because it has already an effect, it marks continuity with a topic, it has an anchoring role, and it has a strong relation with the social reality. Yet it seems that the best strategy is to opt for introducing new concepts. It is what has worked in politics, and it seems to be the best strategy in marketing too.

Nevertheless, Deutsch (2020) argues that reducing conceptual engineering to the strategy of introducing new terms renders conceptual engineering trivial. According to him, this

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strategy has already been carried out not only in philosophy but in many other areas. Technical vocabulary is normally introduced by stipulation and according to some cognitive goals. Therefore, he argues, conceptual engineering through stipulative introduction does not deserve to be acknowledged as a new meta-philosophical position. This claim has been called the “trivialization challenge” (Koch, 2021). An answer to this so-called trivialization challenge would deserve at least another paper, yet I anticipate that I do not see why the activities carried out by philosophers must be unique. Insights from other disciplines have proved useful in lot of philosophical inquiries. A preeminent example of such an exchange is to be found in the prolific area of experimental philosophy. Because philosophers are already using insights from what works in cognitive science, I do not see why they could not use insights from still another context in which a project similar to theirs works, such as the context of social movements.

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