

INTRODUCTION



## Construction and continuity: conceptual engineering without conceptual change

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The papers in this volume originated in a workshop on externalism and conceptual change held at the University of St. Andrews in June 2018. The discussion of conceptual change was driven largely by recent enthusiasm about ‘conceptual engineering’, and while a number of externalist views, and their consequences for the relation between conceptual engineering and conceptual change, were explored at the workshop, issues around ‘temporal’ externalism drew particular focus.

For the temporal externalist, the semantic content of our current thoughts and utterances is grounded not only in our current (and past) usage, but also in how our usage develops in the *future*.<sup>1</sup> This extension of the grounding base for semantic facts will, of course, strike many as unintuitive.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it seems particularly well suited for a conception of philosophy which wishes to see itself as engaged in the process of conceptual *engineering* rather than mere conceptual *analysis*.

After all, one way to distinguish engineering from analysis is that the former emphasizes the fact that we have a role in *creating* and *improving* our concepts while the latter suggests that we are primarily *describing* the concepts that we already happen to find ourselves with. The prospect of improving our concepts can obviously seem appealing, but for many philosophers some of that appeal is lost if it turns out that this improvement necessarily brings with it conceptual change. The philosophical exploration of a question (be it a philosophical chestnut like the nature of justice or a more contemporary topic like the nature of marriage) seems, after all, less interesting (though not necessarily

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<sup>1</sup>Versions of the view can be found, for instance, in Jackman (1999), Wilson (2000), Stoneham (2003), Collins (2006), Tanesini (2006, 2014).

<sup>2</sup>See, for instance, Donnellan (1983), Brown (2000).

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without *any* interest) if what we are doing amounts to changing the subject.<sup>3</sup>

We seem faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, if we are willing to embrace the resulting ubiquity of conceptual change, we can unproblematically think of philosophy as engineering new concepts, but in doing so we lose the continuity with philosophical discussions from the past. On the other hand, if we hold on to continuity, and reject widespread conceptual change in philosophy, it seems like the philosophical project is best seen as descriptive, in which case it would be more accurately characterized as conceptual *analysis* rather than conceptual *engineering* proper. We may want creativity *and* continuity, but it often seems like we can't have both.

One can see this tension in Sally Haslanger's work where three approaches to philosophical questions are discussed. The *conceptual* approach, which examines the a priori connections between our existing concepts, the *descriptive* approach, which involves more empirical investigation of the kinds (if any) that the relevant vocabulary tracks, and the *ameliorative* approach which asks what purposes a particular concept serves and asks what concept would do that work best.<sup>4</sup> Those engaged in 'conceptual' and 'descriptive' projects seem involved in something more easily recognized as philosophical analysis, but the ameliorative project seems to make room for the sorts of improvements that make it more like conceptual engineering proper. When faced with the worry that the ameliorative project always brings with it conceptual change, Haslanger appeals to semantic externalism to make room for continuity. She writes, for instance:

Social constructionists can rely on externalist accounts of meaning to argue that their disclosure of an operative or a target concept is not changing the subject, but better reveals what we mean. By reflecting broadly on how we use the term 'parent', we find that the cases, either as they stand or adjusted through ameliorative analysis, project onto an objective social, not natural, type. So although we tend to assume we are expressing the concept of immediate progenitor by the term 'parent' in fact we are expressing the concept of primary caregiver (or some such); the constructionist shows us that our assumptions about what we mean are false, given our practice. This is not to propose a new meaning, but to reveal an existing one. (Haslanger 2006, 398)

However, while this appeal to semantic externalism (albeit with the relevant experts taken from the social science – and 'critical social theory more broadly (Haslanger 2020, 237)' – rather than the natural sciences),

<sup>3</sup>Worries of this sort go back at least to Strawson's (1963) challenge to Carnap's (1950) understanding of philosophy as involving explication rather than mere analysis.

<sup>4</sup>See, for instance, Haslanger (2005, 367; 2006, 386).

preserves continuity, it can seem to make the project an ultimately *descriptive* one. If we are just revealing an existing meaning, it might seem that any real sense of conceptual amelioration is lost.<sup>5</sup> On most standard understandings of externalism, when the natural or social scientist correct our misconceptions about a given kind, they are just more accurately *describing* a kind that we are already talking and thinking about.

Fortunately, not every variety of externalism is limited in this fashion, and the temporal externalist presents a way out of the dilemma faced by the would-be conceptual engineer. If the modifications we make to our usage in the *future* can help determine what we mean *now*, then the conceptual engineering project can both be creative and preserve the continuity of topic.<sup>6</sup> For the temporal externalist future usage comes into play when the current and past use of our words underdetermines their precise extensions. One could appeal to the literature on the vagueness or the 'open texture' of our concepts to argue that *all* of our terms are underdetermined by our use in this way (See Waismann 1945; Ebbs 2000; Sorensen 2001), but for temporal externalism to be of use to the conceptual engineer, one need not be so ambitious about its scope. Even if one thought that such underdetermination wasn't quite so widespread, one could still argue that it is a common feature of our most central and contested *philosophical* concepts. It is a common feature of philosophically disputed concepts that the general beliefs (the subject of Haslanger's 'conceptual approach') we associate with a word are inconsistent with the facts about what we apply it to (the subject of Haslanger's 'descriptive approach'). We may believe that knowledge requires certainty, but consistently apply the term in cases where such certainty is absent, we may believe that freedom is incompatible with determinism but call many of our causally determined acts free nevertheless, etc.<sup>7</sup> These inconsistencies can be resolved in multiple ways, thus leaving room for more 'ameliorative' considerations to inform how best to make our philosophical terms determinate: we can appeal to more 'practical' considerations to determine which subset of our inconsistent set of commitments should be

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<sup>5</sup>This is, essentially, the criticism of Haslanger in Cappelen (2018, 80).

<sup>6</sup>For an instance of this approach, see Ball (2020) and Ridge (2019). (Though obviously some account will need to be made (as it will with all externalist theories) for how conceptual change is at least sometimes possible (see Jackman 1999, 2005).

<sup>7</sup>Sharp (2020) also suggests that philosophy focuses largely on 'defective concepts', though he tends to view the inconsistent commitments we associate with our philosophical concepts as being in some sense constitutive of the concepts themselves (so that our usage cannot be made consistent without changing the concepts), while the temporal externalist is more likely to understand at least some of the inconsistent commitments as being non-essential to the concept.

preserved.<sup>8</sup> Haslanger's endorsement of the sort of externalism found in the work of Bigelow, Schroeter and Schroeter,<sup>9</sup> rather than the more traditional variety associated with Kripke and Putnam, suggests that she intends ameliorative considerations to be able to contribute in precisely this way. Bigelow and the Schroeter's often write as if there is already a fact about what the optimal way to resolve our conflicting commitments is, but abandoning this assumption is the small step needed to move from their view to a version of temporal externalism.<sup>10</sup>

Temporal externalism thus allows the conceptual engineer to have it both ways: philosophy can be a creative and constructive process, but also as something that preserves continuity with what we have been thinking about all along. Still, the mere fact that it seems to help underwrite a currently popular conception about the nature of philosophy shouldn't on its own be a decisive reason to endorse a metasemantic theory, and the first few of the following papers try to provide other reasons for thinking that temporal externalism is more plausible than it might initially seem.

Jussi Haukioja's 'Semantic Burden-Shifting and Temporal Externalism' tries to make the view more palatable by showing how even the temporal externalist can still remain a 'meta-internalist' in the sense of holding that while semantic *values* are determined by external factors, including events in the future, the correct semantic *theory* for a speaker can remain 'determined by factors internal to the speaker at the time of utterance'.<sup>11</sup> For this sort of meta-internalist, temporal externalism can be true of a speaker and a term provided that they are disposed to re-evaluate their use of the term in response to 'information about the future use' of that term in their speech community, and Haukioja argues that our tendency to understand questions about the extension of our terms as having determinate answers disposes us to accept information about future use in just this way. With the motivation for temporal externalism understood this way, Haukioja goes on to argue that the view, while most commonly defended for various types of kind terms, can also be understood as applying to at least some proper names.

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<sup>8</sup>For a similar suggestion see Richard (2020, 377).

<sup>9</sup>See the discussion of Bigelow and Schroeter (2009) and Schroeter and Schroeter (2009, 2015) in Haslanger (2010, 435), Haslanger (2020, 246–248).

<sup>10</sup>A similar small step is all that is required to adapt Cappelen's (2020) 'master argument' for conceptual engineering to something friendlier to temporal externalism. Cappelen's master argument starts with the assumption that 'if W is a world that has a meaning M, then there are many similar meanings, M<sub>1</sub>, M<sub>2</sub> ... M<sub>n</sub>, W could have'. (Cappelen 2020, 134) and the temporal externalist merely insists that in many cases, M<sub>1</sub>, M<sub>2</sub> ... M<sub>n</sub>, fit the existing pattern of use just as well as M, and so just what W means is currently underdetermined.

<sup>11</sup>He defends meta-internalism at greater length in Cohnitz and Haukioja (2013).

Derek Ball, in his 'Relativism, Metasemantics, and the Future', also focuses on the importance of metasemantics, arguing that temporal externalism has advantages over the various versions of semantic relativism that have recently come to prominence. In particular, Ball explains how temporal externalism not only accounts for our intuitions about the determinacy of our past claims, but also the distribution of our intuitions about when claims using epistemic modals can be understood as correct. The linguistic data around epistemic modals is often used to motivate relativistic semantic theories, but there remain a variety of cases that cause problems for the relativist.<sup>12</sup> For instance, when the use of an epistemic modal is challenged, whether the initial claim is understood as correct or not seems to be a function not only of the information available in a particular context, but also of whether the initial speaker is willing to retract their claim or stand firm in the face of correction. Unlike the relativist, the temporal externalist can allow that, when faced with a challenge based on new information, whether a speaker using an epistemic modal goes on to either retract their claim, or stick to their guns, can itself help determine the content of their initial modal claim (even when the speaker has no firm disposition to respond either way at the claim's time of utterance). As a result, both types of response to correction can be accounted for by the temporal externalist in a way that the relativists, and most of their critics, cannot.

Many of the initial arguments for temporal externalism leaned heavily on the fact that our ascriptional practices were in line with it rather than the more temporally bound alternatives, but while the forward-looking aspect of temporal externalism seems suited for conceptual engineering, it is noteworthy that many of the writers who emphasized these aspects of our ascriptional practices (that we ascribe contents to utterances that are more determinate than our usage could underwrite) took it to call into question the entire assumption that meaning was determined by use.<sup>13</sup> If the tie between meaning and use were broken, the hopes that temporal externalism could underwrite the sorts of ameliorative projects associated with conceptual engineering would be undermined. If meaning isn't a function of use, then the mere fact that we can consciously control our use wouldn't show that we could 'engineer' our meanings or concepts themselves.<sup>14</sup> Henry Jackman, in his 'Temporal externalism, conceptual

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<sup>12</sup>See Kölbel (2002), Richard (2008), MacFarlane (2014) for the former, and von Steup and Gillies (2008) for the latter.

<sup>13</sup>See, for instance, Ebbs (2000, 2009), Lance and Hawthorne (1997); Rouse (2014).

<sup>14</sup>Of course the meaning's being a function of use isn't *sufficient* for our being able to control it (see Cappelen 2018, ch. 7), but it is arguably *necessary*. Cappelen (2018, 73) suggests that temporal externalism only increases our lack of control over what we mean, since further refinements to what we mean may

continuity, meaning, and use' argues that the best way to understand the open texture of our concepts is one that *does* preserve the connection between meaning and use, though doing so requires seeing meaning as 'normative' in a way that leaves some of our metasemantic commitments distinctively practical.

Brice Bantegnie's 'What are the Debates on Same-Sex Marriage and on the Recognition of Trans Women as Women about? On Anti-Descriptivism and Revisionary Analysis' focuses on contemporary debates over the nature of marriage and gender, and argues against the type solution to the continuity problem given by the temporal externalist (particularly Ball 2020) because he takes the temporal externalist to be unable to provide an explanation of how *both* sides in a debate over the proper extension of such terms are rational. Indeed, according to Bantegnie, this rationality constraint can only be met by a 'descriptive externalist' who can capture the perspectives of both sides of such debates.

Whether or not Bantegnie's criticism of temporal externalism sticks, there is another approach to the continuity problem available to the externalist. In particular, externalists can add some more fineness of grain in our representational vocabulary in order to allow one variety of content to be stable (and thus keep our inquiry continuous) while the other aspect changes (so that the engineering project can be substantial and creative). It is typically assumed that representational notions like extensions, topics, meanings, contents and the like will generally hang together, so that changing one is likely to change the others, but if these notions are pulled apart, it may be possible for the conceptual engineer to both have their cake and eat it too. To take one prominent recent example, Cappelen argues that the *extensions* of our terms may vary through our conceptual inquiries, while the *topics* associated with them stay the same, since 'topics are more coarse grained than extensions and intension' (Cappelen 2018, 101).

A version of this general approach can be seen in Sarah Sawyer's 'Truth and Objectivity in Conceptual Engineering' See also (Sawyer 2018, 2020). Sawyer argues that appeals to temporal externalism such as Ball's (2020) or even other bifurcationist views like Capellen's do not allow sufficient room for communal error, and presents an answer to the continuity problem by making a firm distinction between language and thought in order to distinguish the 'concept' (and 'topic') associated with a given

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take place even after we have died, but the fact that we don't have *complete* control over what our terms mean doesn't entail that we can't have at least *some* effect on it, and its our being able to *contribute* to what we have always meant that temporal externalism allows.

word from its linguistic ‘meaning’ (and ‘extension’). This distinction allows for ‘topic preservation through semantic change’, since, the concepts and topics can remain stable while the associated meanings (or ‘conceptions’) and extensions vary over time. It is only the latter group that are thus ‘engineered’ in a more substantial sense (and hopefully ‘improved’, though not by appealing to the sorts of practical purposes presupposed by Haslanger’s conception of amelioration, but rather by being brought into line with the concepts themselves, which are ‘determined by non-conceptual relations to objective properties’).

Anton Alexandrov’s ‘Externalist Perspectives on Meaning Change and Conceptual Stability’ examines a pair of similar splits, presenting two views that allow conceptual stability through meaning change: Sainsbury and Tye’s ‘originalist’ version of externalism (Sainsbury and Tye 2012), in which our *concepts* typically don’t change, even when their *contents* do, and Burge’s anti-individualistic externalism in which the translational meaning (concepts) of our terms can be preserved while their conventional meaning (conceptions) change (Burge 1986, 1993). Each allow something to be engineered (our contents and conventional meanings) while something else (our concepts and translational meanings) preserve the continuity with past discussions. After investigation these varieties of externalism, Alexandrov argues that while the fact that early externalists tended to stress how meaning was stable through theory change,<sup>15</sup> it might seem to many that the *internalist* has an advantage in explaining meaning change, when we look at the fuller variety of externalist views, it seems like externalism ‘as such’ has no consequences for conceptual change, and different varieties of externalism seem perfectly able to accommodate it.

Finally, Matthew Shields in his ‘Conceptual Change in Perspective’ argues against accounts (particularly Cappelen’s and Sawyer’s) that try to explain how we can have things both ways by postulating additional meta-semantic categories, and maintains that the relevant work can be done by treating the difference between the changeable and the stable as being between a difference between two *perspectives*. Shields focuses particularly on the sorts of changes that take place during scientific revolutions, and develops the views of Khun and Rouse (Kuhn 1970[2012]; Rouse 2014, 2015) to argue that from a ‘prospective externalist’ perspective, we understand concepts as continuous, while when we adopt a ‘retrospective internalist’ one, we can understand them as changing.

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<sup>15</sup>See the discussion of natural kind terms like ‘gold’ or ‘water’ in Kripke (1972) and Putnam (1975).

Capturing our intuitive notion of conceptual continuity obviously presents a problem for the would-be conceptual engineer, but it seems clear that many varieties of externalism have the resources to provide various sorts of solutions to this challenge. The following papers don't present any consensus on just what form that solution will take, but all display confidence that at least some version of externalism will be able to do the trick.

### Disclosure statement

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