**Review of:**

**Herman Cappelen**

**Fixing Language. An Essay on Conceptual Engineering**

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*Fixing Language* is a book about an activity nowadays known as ‘conceptual engineering’. In Cappelen’s own words, conceptual engineering is the “process of assessing and improving representational devices” (3). Herman Cappelen is not the first author to theorize about this process, but his monograph is the first book-length contribution to this young and quickly growing field of research. It offers a comprehensive means to engage with the literature about conceptual engineering – a literature which is not always referred to as ‘conceptual engineering’, but sometimes also goes under the labels of ‘Carnapian Explication’ (Carnap 1950), ‘Ameliorative Analysis’ (Haslanger 2006), ‘Metalinguistic Negotiation’ (Plunkett and Sundell 2013, Plunkett 2015), or ‘Conceptual Re-engineering’ (Brun 2016). It is one goal of *Fixing Language* to show that these different theories are theories of a common phenomenon, whose proper recognition has major consequences for philosophical methodology. Another goal of this book is to present and defend a particular view about conceptual engineering. The details will be discussed below, but here are (some of) Cappelen’s main theses: (i) Perhaps despite appearances to the contrary, meaning change is a process which is for the most part inscrutable and beyond control; (ii) contrary to Peter Strawson’s famous critique of revisionary projects in philosophy, it is possible to preserve a topic through semantic revision; (iii) conceptual engineering does not actually involve concepts in any philosophically or psychologically significant sense, but only the extensions and intensions of words (and, to some extent, also the objects that those words refer to). All of these claims are controversial, but Cappelen develops and defends them in a clear and rigorous manner, which makes *Fixing Language* an engaging and thought-provoking read.

Let me begin this review with a brief summary of *Fixing Language.* The book is structured in five parts, each of which contains numerous chapters circulating around a particular subtopic of conceptual engineering. Part I offers an extensive introduction to conceptual engineering, which contains both many examples from inside and outside philosophy, as well as general arguments for the importance of conceptual engineering, its implications for philosophical methodology, and the need to have a general theory about it. Part II-IV contain Cappelen’s own view of conceptual engineering, a view that he refers to as the *Austerity Framework*. More specifically, part II aims to provide a metasemantic foundation for conceptual engineering which does justice to traditional externalist insights. Cappelen models conceptual engineering on typical cases of reference change. The author argues that there is not and cannot be a general theory of reference change, because reference change is inscrutable and not within the voluntary control of language users. As a corollary, the actual implementation of a conceptual engineering proposal is also inscrutable and not within the control of language users. Part III engages extensively with Peter Strawson’s famous objection to Rudolf Carnap’s proposed method of explication, which is arguably a form of conceptual engineering. According to Strawson, it is not possible to improve our concept of, say, knowledge, because any attempt to do so merely changes the topic from knowledge to something else. Cappelen offers two strategies in response to this challenge: firstly, he argues, *pace* Strawson, that topic preservation through semantic revision is possible, since not all semantic differences result in people saying different things. Secondly, Cappelen argues that conceptual engineers may appeal to what he calls ‘lexical effects’ to justify using an old word with a new meaning despite changes of topic. Although Cappelen ultimately rejects this strategy, he does believe that lexical effects, i.e., the psychological and sociological effects of using certain string of letters or sounds, mark an important and underappreciated category in philosophy of language. In part IV, Cappelen argues that despite his claim that conceptual engineering is about the intensions and extensions of words, this process can also be described as being about the object level. Cappelen calls this the ‘worldliness’ of conceptual engineering. According to Cappelen, each utterance expresses not just one, but a very large number of different propositions, such that the proposition semantically expressed is just one of them. And while it is true that conceptual engineering will never result in true propositions semantically expressed by sentences like “What families are has changed”, such sentences may nevertheless express other true propositions. Furthermore, part IV gives a taxonomy of the varieties of conceptual engineering and defends the *Austerity Framework* against various objections. Finally, part V compares the framework with three extant theories about conceptual engineering: metalinguistic negotiation (Ludlow 2014, Plunkett and Sundell 2013, Plunkett 2015), the appeal to a concept’s function or purpose (Haslanger 2000, Brigandt 2010, Thomasson forthcoming), and the Subscript Gambit (Chalmers 2011) – arguing that it fares better than all of these.

In what follows, I will focus on the essential theses and arguments from parts I-IV of *Fixing Language* and assess them in more detail (I will leave out Cappelen’s critique of extant theories of conceptual engineering). In part I, Cappelen advances what he calls the *Anti-Descriptive Argument*. This argument is supposed to show that “at the core of all philosophical activity is the continuous assessment of representational devices” (48), and thus that there is no room for purely descriptive work within philosophy. Notice how radical this view is: it is, for instance, incompatible with a moderately positive attitude towards conceptual engineering, according to which philosophy contains both normative *and* descriptive conceptual work. What is more, the Anti-Descriptive Argument seems to reject the idea that the process of conceptual engineering *itself* involves descriptive elements. This is surprising, given that Cappelen defines conceptual engineering as the “process of assessing and improving representational devices” (3), for surely assessing or improving a given representational device implies describing, or perhaps even analyzing, it first (Koch 2019). Cappelen’s claim is also in stark contrast with what practitioners of conceptual engineering are actually doing: Before suggesting to replace ‘truth’ with the two concepts ‘ascending truth’ and ‘descending truth’, Kevin Scharp (2007, 2013) argues that ‘truth’ is an inconsistent concept, and before proposing to replace our concept ‘knowledge’, Fassio & McKenna (2013) argue that this concept incorporates inconsistent platitudes. This tenet also plays a major role in Carnap’s exposition of explications, e.g., when he argues that we must “do all we can to make at least practically clear what is meant as the explicandum”, and when he goes on complaining that, “in raising problems of analysis or explication, philosophers very frequently violate this requirement” (Carnap 1950, 4).

Cappelen anticipates a reply along these lines, but dismisses it on the grounds that it “shows a lack of understanding of the scope of the revisionary attitude” (48). According to Cappelen, the moderate endorsement of conceptual engineering suggested above implies that there are “safe spaces”, i.e., parts of language which are not defective and which can be used in carrying out descriptive work. But Cappelen thinks that there are no safe spaces. Instead, we should be critical towards *all* of our representational devices, even the ones used in formulating descriptive or normative claims about what a concept does or should mean. On the plausible assumption that assessing and improving representational devices cannot be done without using other representational devices, this picture makes any engagement in conceptual engineering, or as a matter of fact any use of representational devices, close to impossible: before using a representational device, we ought to critically assess it, but we can’t do that, because we cannot rely on other representational devices either.

In my view, this is an implausible position and Cappelen doesn’t provide sufficient reasons for accepting it. What he calls the *Argument from Many Alternatives* merely shows that, in principle, there is no reason to suppose that conceptual defects are limited to certain special cases. This might give us reason to be careful throughout, but it doesn’t license the assumption that all our language is, as a matter of fact, defective, such that we shouldn’t use it to carry out descriptive projects. Moreover, even if, at the end of the day, it *would* be true that all or most of our language is defective, it would still be the case that ameliorators have to deal with one case at a time. They pick out a concept, or a bunch of them, analyze their defects and ameliorate them using other parts of the language which, for the sake of the inquiry, are assumed to be okay. Later on, they can go about ameliorating these parts as well. This might be a never-ending process, in which one amelioration provides the grounds for further ameliorations, which again provide the grounds for re-assessing the earlier ameliorations, etc. It is difficult to see how this can be done without careful descriptive philosophical work.

In part II, Cappelen argues for a thesis he calls *Inscrutable – Lack of Control – Will Keep Trying*, which runs as follows: “The processes involved in conceptual engineering are for the most part inscrutable, and we lack control of them, but nonetheless we will and should keep trying” (72). This thesis is based on an externalist metasemantics, according to which speakers don’t have full access to the meanings of their utterances. Cappelen goes far beyond traditional versions of semantic externalism by claiming that the externalist insights by Kripke (1980) and Putnam (1975) apply not just to proper names and natural kind terms, but to all other parts of language as well. For this reason, the author models conceptual engineering on cases of reference change as they are discussed in the literature (e.g. the Madagascar case, cf. Evans 1973, Kripke 1980). Cappelen argues that the factors which determine meanings and references are too complex to have a comprehensive theory about them, and that as a corollary, it is also impossible to state the mechanisms of reference change. This is even more so, given that Cappelen takes metasemantics to be “in flux”: not only meanings and references are subject to change, but also the kinds of factors which determine meanings and references. The optimistic attitude towards our ability to bring about meaning change that can be found in writings about conceptual engineering is therefore a “hubris” (75) and an “illusion”: “it is an illusion to think that any individual or group has any significant degree of control of the reference-fixing facts. If we are not in control of the reference-fixing facts, then we’re not in control of conceptual engineering because it requires us to change the reference-fixing facts” (74). Strikingly, however, Cappelen does not think that this verdict undermines the normative force of conceptual engineering projects. Even though the prospects of success are dim, we should try nonetheless. In this respect, Cappelen argues, conceptual engineering is no different than other normative enterprises, such as raising a child (75) or lowering crime rates in Baltimore (60).

There are two aspects of this view I find wanting. Firstly, if the mechanism behind conceptual engineering *really were* outside of our control, such that the amelioration of representational devices “has little to do with our intentional efforts” (201), this would seriously undermine the role of conceptual engineering in philosophical methodology (Koch 2018, Pinder 2018). On Cappelen’s view, conceptual engineering is simply not something that people, much less philosophers, can reasonably engage in. Rather, Cappelen seems to think of conceptual engineering as somewhat analogous to natural phenomena like earthquakes: they do happen, what people do might in some ways have an effect on whether they happen, but they are never the result of our intentional actions. The reasonable attitude towards earthquakes is to study them, to try our best to predict and prepare for them; but it doesn’t make any sense to try stopping them or bringing them about. I think the same follows from Cappelen’s view about conceptual engineering. It is really hard to square the *Lack of Control* thesis with his repeated remarks that conceptual engineering should take a top priority in philosophical work.

Secondly, I am not convinced that the *Lack of Control* thesis follows from traditional lines of externalism in the way suggested by Cappelen (Koch 2018). Let me demonstrate this with respect to causal theories of reference in the spirit of Kripke (1980) and Putnam (1975). Very roughly, reference depends on two crucial features according to these theories: (i) the introduction of a term, and (ii) the communicative chain that stretches from the introductory event to its current use. If the term in question is a natural kind term such as ‘water’ or ‘gold’, then (i) implies an implicit (or explicit) generalization from the token sample to other tokens of the kind, where kindhood is ultimately determined by essential properties – e.g. being H20 in the case of water, or having atomic number 79 in the case of gold. On first glance, one might think that such theories are at odds with the project of intentional reference change, for it would seem that in order to change the reference of ‘water’, one would have to change either the essential properties of water, or the way the term ‘water’ was introduced or used in the past, which is both impossible. However, a closer look at the more worked-out versions of causal theories of reference reveal that reference change can nevertheless be the product of our intentional efforts. Kripke himself acknowledges the possibility of new uses ‘overriding’ the referential facts determined by older uses (Kripke 1980, 163). More importantly, Evans (1973) and especially Devitt (1981) stress that terms can be ‘re-grounded’ in different (kinds of) entities. Plausibly, this is what happened to ‘Madagascar’, a name which was introduced to denote parts of the African mainland, but which now denotes an East-African island. On a more general level, Evans notes that the ‘causal source’ of a term is steadily in flux: each utterance a speaker makes can potentially influence what a term refers to. If a critical mass is reached, the reference will switch from one (kind of) entity to another. It is not difficult to imagine this being the outcome of a group’s intentional efforts. The amount of control which an *individual* has over reference change is of course limited. Nonetheless, as a group we are in possession of what me might call *collective long-range control*: through our collective communicative activities we can eventually bring about reference change.

Part III is devoted to addressing the Strawsonian challenge: “[c]hange of extension and intension…is a change of topic, so revisionary projects…are bound to fail. Even if the revisions succeed, they do not provide us with a better way to talk about what we were talking about; they simply change the topic” (100). Cappelen takes this worry very seriously and offers two independent responses. According to the first, topics are individuated in a more coarse-grained fashion than semantic values, which is why they may be preserved through semantic changes. According to the second, what binds together pre-ameliorated and post-ameliorated pieces of language are ‘lexical effects’, i.e., non-semantic and non-pragmatic features of words, such as the associations or framings they prompt. As Cappelen ultimately rejects this second line of response but endorses the first, I shall limit a more detailed discussion to the first. Suffice it to say that I agree with Cappelen’s diagnosis: lexical effects mark an important and perhaps underappreciated category in linguistics; but “exploiting” lexical effects without an “effort to make the case that the revision is topic preserving” (133) undermines rationale discourse and leads to verbal disputes.

Cappelen’s argument that topics are more coarse-grained than semantic values involves the following two steps: (i) it is possible for two speakers A and B to “samesay” each other using a sentence ‘Fa’, even though the extension of ‘F’ in A’s speech differs from the extension of ‘F’ in B’s speech; (ii) “if samesaying is possible despite differences in extension, then so is ‘talking about the same topic’. Sameness of topic goes hand in hand with samesaying” (107f.). Step (i) is backed up by data about inter-contextual samesaying and diachronic samesaying. Many terms of our language are context-sensitive: A person considered tall in the context of a kid’s birthday party might not be considered tall in the context of an NBA basketball game. Despite this, Cappelen argues that it is perfectly okay for a speaker in one context to report what another person said in another context without quoting her, even when this report includes context-sensitive expressions. Cappelen calls this phenomenon *disquotational speech reports*. The pervasiveness and apparent easiness of disquotational speech reports involving context-sensitive expressions lends support to the idea that speakers can say the same thing even though the extensions of one or more of the expressions used therein differ. Similarly, Cappelen argues that people of different times can samesay each other, even if there has been a change in the semantic facts. This point is based on Dorr and Hawthorne (2014), who argue that many expressions of our language are subject to tiny diachronic shifts in meaning (‘plasticity’), but that, nonetheless, “we confidently use homophonic methods in reporting speeches made in the not-too-distant past” (Dorr and Hawthorne 2014: 286). If this practice is licensed, it would seem that it provides further support for the idea that samesaying, and thus topics, are more coarse-grained than semantic values.

Although ingenious, Cappelen’s response is not without difficulties. The first thing to note is that the data about inter-contextual samesaying provided by Cappelen fail to properly address the Strawsonian challenge. According to this challenge, there is no topic continuity between two expressions just in case they differ in meanings. This worry should be construed as being about intensions rather than extensions. To illustrate: Strawson’s worry is not that there is a lack of topic continuity between two speakers using the term ‘woman’ at two different times simply because a couple of women died (and were born) in the meantime. The problem only arises when the intension, i.e., the extension relative to the same circumstances, of ‘woman’ changes. Inter-contextual samesaying of the kind mentioned by Cappelen does not involve differences in intensions. When two speakers A and B use ‘tall’ in different contexts and thus with different extensions, both their uses of ‘tall’ will have the same intension.

Arguably, this is different when it comes to diachronic samesaying. The semantic changes envisaged by Dorr and Hawthorne are the result of changes in intensions. But notice that here the data are less persuasive than in the case of inter-contextual samesaying. First of all, they rest on the controversial *temporal semantic* *plasticity* thesis championed by Dorr and Hawthorne – a thesis which the authors themselves endorse only for a limited number of expressions such as ‘salad’ (how could plasticity be true of philosophically interesting terms like ‘woman’, ‘man’, ‘knowledge’, or ‘truth’?). Moreover, even in cases of semantic drift, do people really say the same thing when they use the expression in question? Consider this in the case of ‘salad’. Say we follow Dorr and Hawthorne when they claim that “‘salad’ has evolved gradually over the last few centuries, from a situation in which people only applied the word to cold dishes with a high preponderance of green leaves of some sort, to the current state where we comfortably apply the word to various warm, leaf-free concoctions” (Dorr and Hawthorne 2014, 284–5). Cappelen thinks that people from back then and people now say the same thing when they use ‘salad’. I’m not so sure – perhaps the reason why we seem to be able to disquotationally report what they said is simply that our use of ‘salad’ is wider than theirs, such that what they counted as salad still counts as salad today (but not vice versa). Or perhaps there is no real samesaying, but the degree of similarity reached at a given instance sometimes suffices for the communicative purposes at issue. Or perhaps disquotational speech reports across semantic drift are never really warranted, but we are just too lazy to properly use quotation marks, and eventually develop the skills to nevertheless interpret people in the intended way. There is a plethora of theoretical options compatible with the data, and Cappelen does not offer decisive reasons for favoring his preferred samesaying-account over the others.

Another worry concerns how we get from the observation that samesaying in the face of different semantic values is *possible* to a satisfying response to the Strawsonian challenge. Ameliorators who grant C*oarse-Grainedness* will still want to know more about when a particular revision crosses the boarder from samesaying to changing the topic. The account above does not specify these conditions, which leaves ameliorators without a manual for how to conduct their theoretical work. Cappelen answers this worry with what he calls the *Contestation Theory of the Limits of Revision:* “there are no fixed rules for how far revision can go. The limits of revision are themselves up for revision, contestation, and negotiation. If there are any rules here at all, it’s that we make up the rules along the way” (116). It might in fact be extremely difficult, or perhaps impossible, to state necessary and sufficient conditions for topic preservation. But it would still be good to know some of the factors on which one has to focus. Note that other theorists (e.g. Prinzing 2017, Thomasson forthcoming), who model topic preservation on a concept’s function or purpose, do just that: they tell us that in order to check for topic preservation, we have to identify the concept’s function. Whether their accounts fare better than the *Contestation Theory* depends on whether an appeal to a concept’s function or purpose is something that can be made sense of – an idea that Cappelen vehemently rejects in part V of *Fixing Language*. To this day, it is perhaps too early to make a final judgement on this matter.

Finally, part IV arrays a number of different issues: it argues for the view that conceptual engineering can be given a worldly description, it offers a taxonomy of the different varieties of conceptual engineering, and replies to some objections to the *Austerity Framework*. The most interesting and controversial element of part IV is surely the *Worldliness* view. Cappelen begins his discussion of this view by distinguishing three different views about what conceptual engineering is about: a) about concepts, b) about the intension and extension of words, and c) about the world, i.e., the object level. Cappelen rejects a) on the grounds that it commits one to a theory of concepts, a theoretical burden which he is not willing to take on board (and which is incompatible with the austerity of his overall framework). We have already been told that Cappelen adopts b). The new and interesting claim he aims to defend now is that b) is compatible with, or perhaps even implies, c). There is one reading of c) which many theorists will accept but which is not the reading Cappelen aims for, namely, that some areas of reality are at least partly grounded in (or ‘depend on’ in some other sense) the behavior and representations of people. For instance, many philosophers believe that facts about money are partly grounded in what people take to be money. An upshot of this view might be that if our concept ‘money’ changes its meaning, then so does money. Cappelen is sympathetic to this view, but aims to defend a more radical version of *Worldliness*. He believes that *Worldliness* holds in all cases, not just those which involve socially grounded entities. His construal of c) roughly goes as follows: there is a difference between *semantic content* and *speech act content*. The discrepancy between the two allows us to say something true when we say, e.g., that marriage has changed, or that families have changed, or that women have changed. In none of these cases will the semantic content of the utterance be true; but the content of the speech act can come out as true nonetheless (138). A background assumption of this view (defended in Cappelen and Lepore 2005) is that actual utterances express a very large number of propositions, only one of them being the proposition semantically expressed (139, n.3).

This view strikes me as puzzling for a number of reasons. For one, it would be good to hear more about the supposed mechanism which determines whether or not a given proposition counts as being expressed by an utterance. If a given utterance expresses a very large number of propositions, with the semantically expressed proposition being just one of them, then which others are and are not expressed by it? Unfortunately, Cappelen’s brief description of the view in *Fixing Language* does not offer much to settle this question. Moreover, Cappelen does not give us an explicit characterization of the proposition expressed by utterances such as “families have changed” which can be both salient and true in certain contexts. Two possible readings come to mind: On one reading, the idea is that, in certain contexts, people can use an utterance formulated on the object-level to express a *metalinguistic* statement such as “the meaning of the word ‘family’ has changed”. It is unlikely that this is Cappelen’s intended reading, though. In his discussion of metalinguistic negotiations in part V, he opposes the idea that sentences formulated on the object-level should be given a metalinguistic reading (172). On another reading, the relevant true proposition expressed by “families have changed” is not metalinguistic, but about *topics*. To recall, Cappelen’s idea is that topics are more coarse-grained than semantic values, such that they can be preserved through semantic revision. What speaks against this reading is that it renders the utterance in question either false or nonsensical. If the imagined revision of ‘family’ is topic-preserving, then the ‘topic-reading’ of “families have changed” is meaningful but false: the topic of ‘family’ hasn’t changed. If the imagined revision of ‘family’ is not topic-preserving, then the ‘topic-reading’ of “families have changed” is nonsensical: there isn’t a single topic about which this claim could be made. Therefore, it seems unclear how to interpret *Worldliness* in a plausible and coherent fashion.

This concludes my critical assessment of the main views defended in *Fixing Language*. As became clear above, I tend to disagree with some of them: to my mind, the conclusion of the *Anti-Descriptive Argument* seems exaggerated; the *Inscrutable – Lack of Control –* *Will Keep Trying* thesis seems to undermine the significance of conceptual engineering and underestimates the collective meaning control of speakers; the data supporting *Coarse-Grainedness* are less suggestive than Cappelen takes them to be; and I find it difficult to wrap my head around *Worldliness*. In the introduction to *Fixing Language*, however, Cappelen articulates a more modest goal of his book: “even if you end up disagreeing with the theory I propose, I hope that you will at least end up agreeing that conceptual engineering is an important topic for philosophers” (10). *Fixing Language* does a great job at accomplishing *this* goal. Moreover, it identifies some of the key issues that any future theory of conceptual engineering will have to address, and offers thought-provoking answers to all of them. Grappling with Cappelen’s answers will surely help to bring the meta-philosophical debate about conceptual engineering to a new level. *Fixing Language* is clear and engaging in style, but since some of its arguments rest on complex background theories in the philosophy of language, I would primarily recommend it to graduate students, other researchers, and perhaps to some advanced undergraduates with a solid background in the philosophy of language.

Steffen Koch

Ruhr University Bochum

Institut für Philosophie II

Universitätsstraße 150

44780 Bochum

Germany

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