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Foundational issues in conceptual engineering: Introduction and overview

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ABSTRACT
This is the introduction to the Special Issue 'Foundational Issues in Conceptual Engineering'. The issue contains contributions by James Andow, Delia Belleri, David Chalmers, Catarina Dutilh Novaes, Eugen Fischer, Viktoria Knoll, Edouard Machery and Amie Thomasson. We, the editors, provide a brief introduction to the main topics of the issue and then summarize its contributions.

KEYWORDS Metaphilosophy; philosophical methods; conceptual engineering; topic discontinuity challenge; conceptual genealogy; experimental philosophy

1. Introduction

Conceptual engineers aim to improve, rather than merely describe, the concepts we use in thought and talk. Many philosophers believe that conceptual engineering does, or at least should, play a major role in philosophy and elsewhere, and that the explicit study of conceptual engineering will serve to better our performance in doing it and generate philosophically fruitful insights along the way. In this vein, recent analytic philosophy has witnessed an upsurge in metaphilosophical debates about the nature and the methodology of conceptual engineering, complemented by detailed discussions of actual or proposed case studies. We welcome these trends, for we believe both in the *hitherto* unused potential of conceptual engineering as well as in how fruitful it is to explicitly address metaphilosophical questions about conceptual engineering.

Recent case studies have shown how widely applicable and powerful the method of conceptual engineering is in philosophy. For instance, Sally Haslanger has shown how conceptual engineering can improve normative theorizing by enabling us to develop categories of race and gender

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that serve the purposes of feminist and anti-racist theorizing, which is itself an important first step in overcoming social oppression (Haslanger 2000, 2012). Kevin Scharp, on the other hand, has demonstrated how conceptual engineering can serve to repair or replace inconsistent concepts that often lie at the heart of deep philosophical problems, such as the famous paradoxes surrounding truth (Scharp 2007, 2013). Haslanger and Scharp draw on rather different considerations in their respective case studies, but they both illustrate a general point: when dealing with weighty philosophical or even societal problems, it can help to assess and, if need be, to re-engineer the conceptual tools one uses to address them.

Following up on Cappelen's (2018) agenda, this special issue is dedicated to the theoretical foundations of conceptual engineering proposals and their motivation in their broadest diversity – what they have in common and what separates them. In doing so, it aims to make progress on some of the most challenging general questions and concerns about the very approach of conceptual engineering. These include the following ones:

(i) *Bootstrapping challenge*: What is it that conceptual engineers are 'engineering' and what does 'engineering' mean to begin with?
(ii) *Challenge from topic discontinuity*: When engineering concepts, does that necessarily lead to a change of topic? If not, what separates good cases from bad ones?
(iii) *Methodological challenge*: How should one go about assessing old and designing new concepts? In particular: how can empirical methods be put to fruitful use here?
(iv) *Implementation challenge*: To what extend is it even realistic to actually implement conceptual engineering proposals? What would be required for it to be feasible?

By addressing these foundational issues thoroughly, this special issue contributes to broadening and deepening the research agenda in conceptual engineering and provides a new stepping-stone in recognition of conceptual engineering as an established field of research.

2. Overview

In his contribution *What is conceptual engineering and what should it be?* (2020), David Chalmers scrutinizes the very notion of conceptual engineering. In close analogy to engineering in the sciences, Chalmers identifies three stages in the process of conceptual engineering: the design

of concepts, their implementation and their evaluation. Unlike other authors (e.g. Cappelen 2018), Chalmers argues that conceptual engineering should encompass both fixing existing concepts (conceptual re-engineering) and creating new concepts from scratch (*de novo* engineering). Similarly, Chalmers distinguishes between homonymous conceptual engineering, where the original lexical item is retained, and heteronymous conceptual engineering, where a new lexical item is introduced. Although theoretically equivalent, Chalmers argues that these two kinds of conceptual engineering come with important practical differences: whereas homonymous conceptual engineering helps to associate the new concept with an existing role, it may also possibly lead to confusion and verbal disputes. With this wide notion of conceptual engineering in place, Chalmers discusses its place in philosophy, arguing that conceptual engineering derives its value from the theses it allows us to formulate. Lastly, Chalmers expresses a preference for de novo engineering and deflates the externalist challenge to conceptual engineering, arguing that the really hard part is to change how people use certain expressions, not to solve the externalist gap between usage and meaning.

The next contribution *Verbal disputes and topic continuity* (2020), by Viktoria Knoll, addresses one of the key challenges to the project of conceptual re-engineering: the worry that re-engineering a concept results in a change of topic. Just like other authors, Knoll connects the problem of topic discontinuity, which was first articulated by Strawson (1963), to the danger of engaging in merely verbal disputes. Then, she argues that the predominant recipe for retaining topic continuity, Cappelen's samesaying account (Cappelen 2018), fails to minimize the risk of mere verbalness. The reason is that two parties can easily talk about the same topic, yet still have a merely verbal dispute. Even worse than that, Knoll argues that applying Cappelen's notion of topic continuity makes us overlook and thus increase the danger of mere verbalness. According to Knoll, however, this result is not as damaging to the project of conceptual engineering as it may first seem: 'I would argue that the goal of conceptual engineering should be seen as one of helping philosophers (and others) ask and answer better questions', which sometimes 'amounts to helping them ask questions with better subject matters – subject matters more worthy of their time and effort' (Knoll 2020: 19). All in all, the right way to deal with the problem from topic discontinuity is therefore not to solve it, but to embrace it.

Delia Belleri's contribution *Downplaying the change of subject objection to conceptual engineering* (2021) also addresses the Strawsonian concern

that conceptual engineering might lead to unwanted changes of topic. Belleri first explicates the objection in terms of discontinuity of inquiry. So construed, the worry is that by re-engineering central terms or concepts of an inquiry, the answers one ends up formulating are not answers of one's original questions. Belleri then criticizes the two dominant accounts of topic continuity: Cappelen's samesaying account and functionalism. Against the samesaying account, Belleri objects that samesaying judgments are too unstable and contestable to make for a useful test of topic continuity; against the functionalist approach, Belleri objects that conceptual functions are epistemically too indeterminate to serve as a workable criterion. Her own solution is then to distinguish two different kinds of object-level inquiries: the semantically conservative ones and the semantically progressive ones. While the former strictly demand semantic continuity, the latter are open to varying degrees of semantic change. Belleri argues that the Strawsonian worry arises only for the former kind of inquiry, which is comparatively rare. As a result, Belleri's account serves to seriously downplay the scope and severity of the change of subject objection to conceptual engineering.

In her contribution, *Carnap meets Foucault: Conceptual engineering and genealogical investigations* (2020), Catarina Dutilh Novaes combines two trends of her previous research (Dutilh Novaes 2016, 2020) to show the relevance of conceptual history for conceptual engineering. Dutilh Novaes argues that Carnapian explication and Foucaultian genealogy both are revisionary enterprises that are normatively neutral, in the sense that the concepts they target are evaluated in relation to their purposes, and that establishing these purposes, in turn, requires some external normative input. As she notes, 'While this feature may be seen as a weakness from a substantive, philosophical perspective, from a methodological perspective it is in fact an advantage, ensuring the wide applicability of the two methods' (Dutilh Novaes 2020: 8–9) – a valuable lesson for would-be conceptual engineers. Dutilh Novaes next moves on to analyzing the lack of clear guidance, in Carnap's method, as to how one should proceed to clarify the target concept of an explication prior to engaging in an explication project. With this in mind, she then argues that Foucaultian genealogies are 'an exceptionally powerful diagnostic tool' (Dutilh Novaes 2020: 13), with an appropriate 'level of granularity' (Dutilh Novaes 2020: 18), to remedy this important lacuna, for instance, in helping to understand the current uses of a concept, its functions or its possibility of transformation. Through a pragmatist, functionalist methodological approach to concepts for conceptual engineering, Dutilh

Novaes thus establishes the relevance of conceptual history for normative inquiry in philosophical analysis and theorizing in general.

Amie Thomasson's contribution *Conceptual Engineering: When do we need it? How can we do it?* (2021) nicely complements her earlier work on the role of functional assessments in conceptual engineering (Thomasson 2020). It aims to answer two foundational questions: What are the signs that conceptual engineering is needed? and How can one successfully implement a given conceptual engineering proposal? With respect to the first question, Thomasson suggests a list of conceptual problems that motivate re-engineering, each of which comes with their own criteria of success: (i) when there are internal problems such as paradoxes or puzzles, (ii) when the concept fails to serve an extant function, (iii) when it serves a problematic function and (iv) when we need it to serve a new function. With respect to the second question, Thomasson first argues that the kind of conceptual engineering she is interested in is mostly about words rather than concepts and that words should be understood as historical abstract artifacts. This account allows her to exploit insights from historical linguistics and to bolster her view that words serve functions and are governed by norms of usage. Drawing on work about social norms from Bicchieri and Mercier, Thomasson concludes by sketching concrete guidelines for implementing conceptual engineering in terms of shifting social norms.

In his contribution *A New Challenge to Conceptual Engineering* (2021), Édouard Machery tackles the pressing question of whether and how conceptual engineering can be put into practice. Unlike abstract, metasemantic approaches to the so-called implementation challenge to conceptual engineering, Machery frames the possibility of conceptual engineering as a concrete, practical issue that depends on 'contingent facts about the actual world' (Machery 2021: 2). Against this background, Machery introduces the notion of an 'attractor', which he characterizes as a particular type of psychological structure (e.g. a concept) that is disposed to influence how people think, the inferences they draw, the information they are likely to retain, transform or forget, etc. Drawing on a substantial body of experimental research about the concept of innateness together with his own work on concepts as 'individual-level, psychological entities' (Machery 2021: 3) (cf. Machery 2009, 2017), Machery then formulates the attractor challenge to conceptual engineering as follows: when the explicandum of an engineering project is an attractor, the explicatum is likely to be overridden by the explicandum in the relevant contexts of use and remains otiose; in such cases, 'conceptual engineering is thus unlikely to

be worth the effort' (Machery 2021: 17). As Machery notes, the challenge posed by attractor concepts to conceptual engineering extends beyond science, where their influence might even be harder to counteract in the absence of the greater control over our conceptual apparatus afforded by, for instance, formal systems and operationalized definitions. Consequently, Machery urges conceptual engineers to empirically examine the feasibility prospects of their enterprise, before concluding that '[i]gnoring this task is unacceptable in light of the stakes of conceptual engineering' (Machery 2021: 21).

In his contribution *Conceptual Control: On the Feasibility of Conceptual Engineering* (2020), Eugen Fischer also considers the feasibility problem for conceptual engineering from an empirical perspective. Observing that conceptual engineers typically seek to endow extant words with new meanings in order to enhance verbal reasoning, Fischer formulates the feasibility problem in terms of whether competent thinkers have sufficient control over their concept-involving cognitive competencies so as to bring them in line with such semantic prescriptions. Fischer draws his first lesson from psycholinguistic research about polysemy processing: conceptual engineers should not aim to replace the conceptual content associated with polysemous words, but rather to change the ways in which this content is deployed in cognition and combined with further background information. Fischer's second lesson builds on recent findings in experimental philosophy. It identifies a gap in the control competent thinkers have over the deployment of the content of their concepts, which itself results from a 'salience bias': inferences that are licensed by the dominant sense of a polysemous word are likely to influence reasoning with the less salient sense, 'even when thinkers explicitly know they are inappropriate' (Fischer 2020: 14). 'Where it is affected by salience bias', Fischer says, 'natural language reengineering is thus set to reduce, rather than enhance, our ability to reason properly' (Fischer 2020: 20). In conclusion, to work around the control gap arising from the salience bias, he extrapolates three rules of thumb whose application will require from conceptual engineers to embark in an empirically-based, interdisciplinary project; only then, Fischer claims, will they be able to 'actually improve our ability to reason with words' (Fischer 2020: 25).

In his contribution *Fully Experimental Conceptual Engineering* (2020), James Andow explores further the ways in which experimental philosophy can contribute to conceptual engineering. Andow starts by dissolving the apparent tension between the normative bent of conceptual engineering projects and the purely descriptive approach of experimental

philosophers, arguing that normative projects 'frequently require[] a lot of descriptive information' (Andow 2020: 4). However, Andow observes, most of the existing literature on addressing this tension has so far only focused on how experimental philosophy can help assessing current or proposed conceptual resources against some specified normative standards, without considering whether it can contribute to establishing these normative standards – and thus make conceptual engineering 'a fully experimental project' (Andow 2020: 7). After having justified the possibility of such a project in principle, Andow goes on to describe its successive stages by applying it to the concept of gender. Generalizing on the structure of his example, Andow then constructs 'a general recipe for a project of fully experimental conceptual engineering' (Andow 2020: 14). Andow organizes his recipe in three main stages: (i) establishing the basic parameters of the project, (ii) its normative constraints, and (iii) the conceptual resources that meet the constraints. In doing so, Andow sets the scene for the different stakeholders, their relationships, and the processes involved in an empirically-based and guided project in conceptual engineering with great sophistication. This will surely benefit those of conceptual engineers 'open to using the best available methods […] when it comes to determining the normative constraints that will guide one's project' (Andow 2020: 22) – namely, the empirical methods.

This Special Issue started as a wild idea in a pre-pandemic world, prompted by a few drinks and the majestic Manhattan skyline at the closing party of NYU's 'Foundations of Conceptual Engineering' conference (September 2018). Since then, conceptual engineering has gone a long way, up to becoming a major topic at the cutting edge of research in analytic philosophy, whose attraction is still growing with explosive intensity. May this Special Issue contribute to its further advancement, consolidating the foundations that are needed for putting it into practice effectively.

In closing, we would like to thank Herman Cappelen, the journal's editor in chief, for making this Special Issue possible; Matthew McKeever, the executive associate editor, for the incredible amount of help he gave us in due course; the contributors for filling these pages with content; the many anonymous reviewers for their help in selecting the best and most fitting contributions; and, last but not least, the authors whose submissions we sadly had to rejected.

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