

How Not to Not Change the Subject (and How to *Actually* Not Change the Subject)

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Sally Haslanger (2020a, 2020b) proposes a way for semantic amelioration to avoid the ‘topic continuity problem’ (TCP) in conceptual engineering. TCP maintains that changing a concept’s content replaces the concept. Since this occurs in semantic amelioration, semantic amelioration necessarily seems an instance of conceptual replacement. Haslanger rejects this, however, maintaining that a concept’s function is essential to it, not its content. And since semantic amelioration doesn’t change a concept’s function, semantic amelioration isn’t conceptual replacement, according to Haslanger. In this paper, I argue that Haslanger’s account of semantic amelioration requires a change in a concept’s function. Thus, semantic amelioration is in fact conceptual replacement on Haslanger’s account. To fix this, I propose combining Amie Thomasson’s (2020) work on concepts with Haslanger’s to yield a new functional essentialist view of concepts.

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1. Introduction

Sally Haslanger’s (2012) “ameliorative” projects have received much attention in the conceptual ethics literature, specifically as it pertains to the ‘topic continuity problem’ (TCP). TCP maintains that any attempt at conceptual revision results in conceptual replacement (Cappelen (2018), Kocurek (2022)). This is precisely what semantic amelioration seeks to attain. When we

semantically ameliorate a term or concept, “we change what partition of logical space the term or concept represents, that is, we undertake to change our thought and talk to do better in tracking reality” (Haslanger, 2020a, p. 242; 2020b, p. 239). Put simply, semantic amelioration changes a concept’s *content* to make it better.

We can understand a concept’s content as a concept’s *extension*. A concept’s content – or, as Haslanger calls it (following Yalcin (2016)), a concept’s “partition of logical space” – then, is that which the concept picks out and separates from other things in the world. The concept [MARRIAGE]’s¹ content, for example, are those relationships and bonds that we call ‘marriages;’ [MARRIAGE] separates the logical space we call ‘marriage’ from the rest of the world. [MARRIAGE] therefore allows us to speak of marriages because marriages are [MARRIAGE]’s content.

Now since semantic amelioration makes a concept better by changing its content, semantically ameliorating [MARRIAGE] means changing [MARRIAGE]’s content for the better. This requires changing what we consider a marriage – and so, who can get married – for the better. Thus, we semantically ameliorate a concept like [MARRIAGE] by changing who can get married for the better.

This is where TCP enters the picture on semantic amelioration: Doesn’t changing a concept’s content ‘change the subject’? In conceding that, for instance, same-sex couples couldn’t get married in pre-2015 America but that they now can, don’t we plainly admit that [MARRIAGE] has been replaced with, e.g., [MARRIAGE*]? Isn’t a concept’s content essential to it? You might especially think so if you think that a concept’s *intension* is essential to it. A concept’s intension is, basically, a concept’s meaning, i.e., the conditions under which something is in the extension

¹ Writing words in this way will denote the corresponding concept of the term.

of a term or concept (Putnam, 1973, pp. 699-700; 1975, pp. 134-136). ‘Marriage’s’ (and [MARRIAGE]’s) intension in the present-day US is plausibly a civil union between any two (consenting) people. This allows that any two people can get married. From this, the link between a concept’s intension and extension or content seems clear: a concept’s intension determines its extension.² Consequently, if we want to change a concept’s content – as we do in semantic amelioration – we seem forced to change that concept’s intension. But surely, as Mark Richard writes, “substantial changes in semantics mean abandoning the concept” (Richard, 2020, p. 361).³ So, if you sympathize with TCP, you reject that semantic amelioration could be conceptual revision. It must be conceptual replacement.

Haslanger recently resists the above, offering a way to reject *content essentialism* about concepts, i.e., that a concept’s content is essential to it. Haslanger therefore rejects that changing a concept’s content replaces the concept. Instead, Haslanger proposes that, for at least some concepts, we should be – what I term – *functional essentialists*. This, she argues, renders semantic amelioration intelligible as conceptual revision rather than replacement. I argue, however, that Haslanger’s solution fails. For she fails to acknowledge the integral link between concept functions and their content. I argue that Amie Thomasson’s (2020) recent work on concepts can remedy this problem and yield a better functional essentialist view of concepts, thereby revealing how to *actually* not change the subject in semantic amelioration.

² Putnam (1973) and (1975) notably argues against this. But he more so means to argue that the psychological state of a speaker doesn’t determine a concept’s extension. If, for example, I start calling all tables ‘chair’ and all chairs ‘tables,’ I’m wrong to do so, even if in my mind it is correct to call tables ‘chair’ and chairs ‘table,’ i.e., even if what I mean by ‘chair’ is what you mean by ‘table.’ In other words, the speaker can’t determine the meaning of her spoken terms; what I intend by ‘chair’ doesn’t determine what ‘chair means.’ Putnam therefore set the groundwork for semantic externalism. See Haslanger (2012a), Ball (2020), Richard (2020), Koch (2021), and Kocurek (2022), for more on semantic externalism.

³ To be clear, Richard agrees with Haslanger that semantic amelioration doesn’t necessarily change the subject. At this point, he’s merely motivating the thought that it perhaps does.

2. How Not to Change the Subject

Functional essentialism maintains that a concept's *function* – not its content – is essential to it. As I understand Haslanger, a concept's function is what that concept does for us; we deduce a concept's function by considering the role that that concept plays in society. Concerning [MARRIAGE], Haslanger suggests that a [MARRIAGE] concept is one that helps us process couples' private lives (Haslanger, 2020b, p. 254). We call two people 'married,' then, to denote that they are engaged in a specific, intimate relationship with one another. So, let's consider a [MARRIAGE] concept one that helps society process information regarding a specific relationship between two people; let us consider that this is what [MARRIAGE] is for.⁴

Haslanger asks us to consider three different [MARRIAGE] concepts – social, legal, and religious. Each of these [MARRIAGE] concepts function slightly differently. As I read Haslanger, couples are socially married if they conduct their private lives according to how we think married couples generally or ought to do so; couples are legally married if they obtain the proper documentation to be considered such in the government's eyes; and couples are religiously married if they perform the proper religious ceremony to be considered such in that religion's eyes. As a result, a given couple can be socially married and fulfill [MARRIAGE]'s social function, but not legally or religiously married, according to Haslanger. In this respect, these [MARRIAGE] concepts can be at odds; a couple can be (socially) married but not (legally and/or religiously) married.

Haslanger writes that, in the historical United States, “a social marriage was a legal marriage was a religious marriage (more or less)” (p. 253). Being legally and socially married, that

⁴ It is unclear to me whether or not we can cash conceptual functions out in terms of conceptual intensions on Haslanger's account. If we can, then Haslanger's rejecting content essentialism may amount to rejecting the link between a concept's content and its intension. In turn, we can semantically ameliorate a concept without changing its intension, i.e., its function, and so can avoid TCP.

is, required being religiously married. Religious [MARRIAGE], however, excluded same-sex couples. This focused [MARRIAGE] on heterosexual couples; heterosexual couples were thought to be the only kinds of couples that could get married in any sense. Over time, however, disparities between social, legal, and religious [MARRIAGE] came to light. New kinds of couples began to fulfill [MARRIAGE]'s social function but not its legal or religious functions, as alluded to above. And “[a]s same-sex couples came to be increasingly recognized as socially married,” claims Haslanger, “pressure increased to extend the boundaries of legal and religious marriage” (p. 255).

Haslanger thus suggests that the wide applicability of social [MARRIAGE] prompted changes in legal and religious [MARRIAGE]. It caused Americans to notice a more important partition of logical space that (legal and religious) [MARRIAGE] can refer to, namely, same-sex couples. Specifically, Americans noticed that shifting [MARRIAGE]'s metasemantics – i.e., rendering [MARRIAGE] a primarily social rather than legal or religious concept – thereby allowing its content to include same-sex couples, allows us “to better manage intimacy and childrearing” (Ibid). If, in other words, [MARRIAGE] excludes same-sex couples, we lose sight of its most important, *social* function – one that *all* couples can fulfill. In this way, precluding same-sex couples from marriage of any kind proves a moral failing, suggests Haslanger. For in doing so, we fail to acknowledge [MARRIAGE]'s most important function of regulating intimate parts of couples' lives. Hence, Americans remedied this failure – as I understand Haslanger – by shifting [MARRIAGE]'s metasemantics: Legal and religious [MARRIAGE] opted to align with [MARRIAGE]'s social function to include *all* couples and thereby highlight a (morally) better partition of logical space.⁵

⁵ Haslanger omits many nuances that led to [MARRIAGE]'s amelioration. This is, I take it, to make semantic amelioration easier to understand: “I am arguing, generally, for the coherence of semantic amelioration against the content essentialist, and using a story about [MARRIAGE] (perhaps true of our world, but maybe only of another

Now despite [MARRIAGE]'s semantic amelioration and change in content in 2015, [MARRIAGE] continued to play the role of capturing a specific relationship between two (consenting) people. Thus, [MARRIAGE]'s function remained unchanged. And if Haslanger is right and concepts like [MARRIAGE] have their functions essentially, then [MARRIAGE] was not replaced in 2015 in the US. It was merely revised. Hence, Haslanger proposes, semantic amelioration need not result in conceptual replacement; we can reject content essentialism about concepts.

3. A Valiant Effort

While I am sympathetic to Haslanger's framework, I'm skeptical that it succeeds; I'm not sure that Haslanger's framework of semantic amelioration avoids TCP. First, Haslanger's idea of conceptual functions seems vastly underdefined and similar to conceptual intensions in a key regard.⁶ Specifically, just as conceptual intensions are traditionally assumed to determine conceptual extensions, so too does it seem to me that conceptual functions give rise to conceptual content on Haslanger's account. If I'm right about this, then a change in [MARRIAGE]'s content requires a change in [MARRIAGE]'s function. Therefore, [MARRIAGE]'s semantic amelioration entailed a functional change, and so – per the functional essentialist picture – [MARRIAGE] was replaced when ameliorated in 2015.

I shall first motivate conceptual functions yielding conceptual content: If [MARRIAGE] serves to capture a specific relationship between two people or regulate intimate parts of couples'

possible world) as an example” (Haslanger, 2020b, p. 255). So I think that Haslanger is happy to grant that [MARRIAGE]'s semantic amelioration is much more complex than she lets on. The picture described above merely serves to elucidate how Haslanger sees semantic amelioration working without changing the subject, that is, not on a content essentialist framework.

⁶ This is perhaps because Haslanger strives to remain neutral on what a concept is, admitting that she doesn't have a full-fledged view of them (Haslanger, 2020a, p. 230 & p. 238).

lives, then [MARRIAGE]'s content cannot fail to involve two people engaged in a specific relationship. As a result, any two people displaying the proper relationship are married, and any two people who fail to display the proper relationship are unmarried. This, I imagine, is what it means to "fulfill," as Haslanger puts it (Haslanger, 2020b, p. 255), [MARRIAGE]'s function. Thus, [MARRIAGE]'s function determines that its content necessarily involves those couples engaged in a specific relationship; a concept's content derives from its function.

Now recall, Haslanger maintains that (legal and religious) [MARRIAGE] wasn't replaced when semantically ameliorated in 2015; Americans mean exactly the same thing by 'married' when they today say 'same-sex couples can get married' as they did when they said 'same-sex couples cannot get married' pre-2015. This means that [MARRIAGE] played the role of, e.g., capturing an intimate relationship between two people (or some other role that same-sex couples can fulfill) pre- and post-2015, since Haslanger's framework is functional essentialist. But if [MARRIAGE] always functioned this way, then it seems to me that same-sex couples were always included in [MARRIAGE]'s partition of logical space on her account. For 'captures an intimate relationship between two people' is a function that *all* couples can fulfill by displaying the proper relationship. As a result, same-sex couples could fulfill [MARRIAGE]'s function pre-2015 and so were within [MARRIAGE]'s extension. This, however, is wrong. [MARRIAGE] *didn't* always include same-sex couples. It was *false* to say that same-sex couples could get married in the US pre-2015. Same-sex couples, that is, were outside [MARRIAGE]'s partition of logical space pre-2015. And the only way that this can be so on Haslanger's account, I contend, is if [MARRIAGE] functioned differently pre-2015 compared to post-2015. Specifically, [MARRIAGE] must have functioned such that same-sex couples couldn't fulfill its function pre-2015. If they could, then, again, it never would have been false to say that same-sex couples could get married; same-sex

couples would have always been part of [MARRIAGE]'s content. Consequently, [MARRIAGE]'s change in logical space in 2015, on Haslanger's account, must have derived from a change in [MARRIAGE]'s function; there must be something about [MARRIAGE]'s function that allows same-sex couples to fulfill it now, whereas they couldn't have before.

Now it's plausible that Haslanger means to suggest that [MARRIAGE] served to, e.g., capture a specific relationship between two people pre-2015, but that its content precluded it from fully satisfying this function pre-2015. This is confusing to me, however. Why would [MARRIAGE]'s content have excluded same-sex couples if not because of its function? If it's because of [MARRIAGE]'s intension (assuming conceptual intensions and conceptual functions differ),⁷ then why was [MARRIAGE]'s intension such that it rendered [MARRIAGE] exclusive to same-sex couples if not because of its function? Something doesn't add up here. A concept's function, intension, and extension, it seems to me, must be linked, such that a change in one requires a change in the others. That may be wrong. But I can't know, given Haslanger's inadequate explanation of what concepts are and what it means for them to have functions. So I'm doing my best.

I therefore conclude that the only way to make sense of [MARRIAGE]'s semantic amelioration on Haslanger's account is by attributing it to a functional change in [MARRIAGE]. And because Haslanger's framework is functional essentialist, this means that [MARRIAGE] underwent an essential change when semantically ameliorated. As a result, [MARRIAGE] was

⁷ I think that they do. But there might be a way of construing conceptual functions on Haslanger's account as conceptual intensions. I think we can divide conceptual functions from intensions, on Haslanger's account, the following way, however: [MARRIAGE]'s function is to capture a specific relationship between two people, while [MARRIAGE]'s intension is 'a specific relationship between two people.' It's a minor difference. But it seems relevant, nonetheless. Notice, however, that this account of conceptual functions makes conceptual intensions derive from conceptual functions. This motivates my intuition that a concept's function, intension, and content are all linked.

replaced when semantically ameliorated; [MARRIAGE] plays a different role in American society post-2015 and so is a new concept.

4. A Proper Solution

If the above is right and I'm representing Haslanger accurately, then I think Amie Thomasson's (2020) work on concepts can save Haslanger here. Thomasson compares concepts to artifacts (Thomasson, 2020, p. 446). Specifically, just as artifacts have proper functions, she proposes, so too may concepts. Now an object's proper function is that which an object does best. Likewise, a concept's proper function is that which a concept does best and is the reason that concept was "perpetuated in our culture" (pp. 445-448). Take [WATER]. Plausibly, our [WATER] concept serves to pick out liquid H₂O. It also, however, serves to pick out 'liquid that replenishes me' and 'liquid that I wash with.' Finding [WATER]'s proper function – and so the function that [WATER] serves best – on Thomasson's framework, requires questioning what we couldn't do or speak of as effectively without [WATER]. Out of the functions listed above that [WATER] can serve (there are no doubt more, but I'm trying to keep things simple), picking out liquid H₂O seems its proper one. [WATER], that is, plausibly picks out liquid H₂O best. For without [WATER], speaking of liquid H₂O becomes incredibly difficult to do. Thus, we can consider 'picking out liquid H₂O' [WATER]'s proper function.⁸

What, then, are we to make of the other non-proper functions of [WATER], like picking out 'liquid that replenishes me' and 'liquid that I wash with'? While Thomasson doesn't say, I propose that we call these *accidental functions* of [WATER]. These functions are not most fundamental or proper to [WATER]; they are not what [WATER] does best and are (likely) not

⁸ You might disagree with this. If so, then swap [WATER]'s proper function out with something else. This is peripheral to the argument.

why [WATER] was conjured. Accidental functions are, in essence, ways that a concept *can* function. So let us consider concepts as serving a variety of functions, some of them accidental and at least one of them proper.

Combining the above with Haslanger's functional essentialism yields *proper functional essentialism* (PFE). PFE maintains that conceptual replacement occurs if and only if concepts lose their proper functions. This means that accidental functions are of no matter as it pertains to maintaining the subject. [WATER], that is, could fail to pick out 'liquid that replenishes me' and 'liquid that I wash with' without being replaced or going out of existence. For these functions are *accidental* to [WATER]. They are not essential to it, unlike [WATER]'s proper function of picking out liquid H₂O.

PFE therefore accounts for [MARRIAGE]'s semantic amelioration thus: First, PFE renders 'captures a specific relationship between two people' [MARRIAGE]'s *proper* function. This is plausibly what [MARRIAGE] does best and is plausibly why [MARRIAGE] was perpetuated in our culture. Accordingly, were [MARRIAGE] to lose this function, claims PFE, it would go out of existence. Supposing this is true, then [MARRIAGE] was not replaced in 2015 in the United States when semantically ameliorated because [MARRIAGE] retained its proper function of capturing a specific relationship between two people. [MARRIAGE], in other words, captured a specific relationship between two people pre-2015. And [MARRIAGE] still captures a specific relationship between two people post-2015. As a result, [MARRIAGE] retained its proper function when semantically ameliorated in 2015. Therefore, PFE maintains, [MARRIAGE] was not replaced.

The above is fairly consistent with Haslanger's framework. Here, however, is the crucial difference: I explained before that if Haslanger is right and [MARRIAGE]'s function was always friendly to same-sex couples, such that it wasn't replaced when semantically ameliorated in 2015,

then it isn't clear why same-sex couples were ever excluded from [MARRIAGE]'s partition of logical space. PFE offers us an explanation here. If 'captures a specific relationship between two people' is [MARRIAGE]'s proper function and [MARRIAGE] wasn't replaced when semantically ameliorated in 2015, then [MARRIAGE] didn't *essentially* exclude same-sex couples pre-2015. For [MARRIAGE]'s proper function, in this case, is friendly to same-sex couples. So we can't attribute [MARRIAGE]'s excluding same-sex couples to [MARRIAGE]'s proper function. Nevertheless, there must be some function of [MARRIAGE] that we can point to, to explain [MARRIAGE]'s excluding same-sex couples pre-2015. For, as previously argued, concepts get their content from their functions on a functional essentialist framework. Because, however, the function that caused [MARRIAGE]'s excluding same-sex couples wasn't essential or proper to it – else [MARRIAGE]'s semantic amelioration replaced it – it must have been accidental, claims PFE. PFE, that is, claims that [MARRIAGE] excluded same-sex couples *accidentally*. It claims that [MARRIAGE] served some accidental function precluding it from applying to same-sex couples, since it couldn't have done so essentially if it is the same concept it was pre-2015. So let us assume that [MARRIAGE] served the accidental function, 'excludes same-sex couples,' pre-2015, preventing it from applying to same-sex couples.

So, pre-2015, [MARRIAGE] excluded same-sex couples. Post-2015, it doesn't. Pre-2015, [MARRIAGE]'s proper function was to capture a specific relationship between two people. Post-2015, [MARRIAGE]'s proper function is *still* to capture a specific relationship between two people. Here's the difference between [MARRIAGE] pre- and post-2015, according to PFE, and what occurred when [MARRIAGE] was semantically ameliorated: Pre-2015, [MARRIAGE] served the accidental function, 'excludes same-sex couples,' thus causing it to exclude same-sex couples *accidentally*. Post-2015, [MARRIAGE] no longer serves this function. For

[MARRIAGE]'s function, 'excludes same-sex couples,' was erased in [MARRIAGE]'s semantic amelioration, thereby allowing it to apply to same-sex couples. And because 'excludes same-sex couples' was a mere *accidental* function of [MARRIAGE], [MARRIAGE] was not replaced when semantically ameliorated.⁹ PFE thus improves on Haslanger's framework in this crucial regard: Haslanger must deny that [MARRIAGE] underwent a functional change when semantically ameliorated, since she maintains that a concept's function is essential to it and that [MARRIAGE] was not replaced in 2015 when semantically ameliorated. But [MARRIAGE] *must* have undergone a conceptual change in 2015 if its content changed on a functional essentialist framework. So, if Haslanger is right that [MARRIAGE]'s function is essential to it, then she is wrong that [MARRIAGE] wasn't replaced in 2015. PFE, on the other hand, accepts that [MARRIAGE] underwent a functional change. It, however, qualifies this point, maintaining that this functional change was *accidental*. As such, [MARRIAGE] was not replaced when semantically ameliorated; functional changes need not change the subject if we adopt proper functional essentialism. And if functional essentialism about concepts is correct, then, I argue, this is the functional essentialism we must accept.

⁹ I'm once again going to flag something I said in fn. 5: [MARRIAGE]'s semantic amelioration was no doubt much more complex than I'm letting on. I'm merely trying to fix Haslanger's account of semantic amelioration, here, which is why I proceed with the simplified picture of [MARRIAGE]'s semantic amelioration that Haslanger does.

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