

# Conceptual Engineering and the Politics of Implementation

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## Abstract

Conceptual engineering is thought to face an ‘implementation challenge’: the challenge of securing uptake of engineered concepts. But is the fact that implementation is challenging really a defect to be overcome? What kind of picture of political life would be implied by making engineering easy to implement? We contend that the ambition to obviate the implementation challenge goes against the very idea of liberal democratic politics. On the picture we draw, the implementation challenge can be overcome by institutionalizing control over conceptual uptake, and there are contexts—such as professions that depend on coordinated conceptual innovation—in which there are good reasons to institutionalize control in this fashion. But the liberal fear of this power to control conceptual uptake ending up in the wrong hands, combined with the democratic demand for freedom of thought as a precondition of genuine consent, yields a liberal democratic rationale for keeping implementation challenging.

## 1. Introduction

Conceptual engineering, with its ambition not merely to analyze, but to assess and alter people’s concepts, is intimately tied up with issues in political philosophy. It takes on the burden of determining what counts as an ‘improvement’ to our conceptual repertoire, and who gets to decide. These questions have a political dimension, and rapidly lead into questions about the distribution of power and authority.<sup>1</sup> Once these political undertones

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that conceptual analysis lacks political ramifications as long as it limits itself to describing the *status quo*—it clearly has such ramifications even then, and the charge that conceptual analysis’ aspiration to remain above the political fray amounts to a spectatorial

of the project of engineering people's concepts are heard, the phrase 'conceptual engineering' can acquire a sinister ring, and it becomes clear that something needs to be said to mark it off from totalitarian thought control (it was, after all, Stalin who, in a speech on the role of Soviet writers, hailed them as 'engineers of human souls').<sup>2</sup> Yet these political dimensions of conceptual engineering have so far remained comparatively under-explored in a field predominantly informed by the philosophy of language and mind.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, we propose to examine the productive intersections between conceptual engineering and political philosophy in connection with 'the implementation challenge' that has recently been at the forefront of the conceptual engineering literature:<sup>4</sup> the challenge of how to *implement* a piece of ameliorative conceptual engineering, i.e. of how to recruit people into using a concept that would improve their conceptual repertoire. Opinions differ on how serious the implementation challenge is. One prominent view is that no individual or group has any significant degree of control over how conceptual change happens, but that even if we have reason to regard conceptual engineering efforts as futile, we should keep trying (an attitude reminiscent Antonio Gramsci's injunction that we should combine 'pessimism of the intellect with optimism of the will').<sup>5</sup> Others have

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conservatism is one of the oldest charges against it. Some of the earliest critics to raise it include Ernest Gellner, Herbert Marcuse, and Lewis Feuer. See Wertheimer (1976) and Krishnan (Forthcoming) for historical overviews and assessments of this charge.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Berlin (2002, p. 82).

<sup>3</sup> A notable exception is Marques (2020).

<sup>4</sup> See Cappelen and Plunkett (2020), Deutsch (2020), Koch (2020), Fischer (2020), Nado (2020), Isaac (2021), Jorem (2021), and Nimtz (2021). How exactly they understand the implementation challenge of course varies with their particular interests and metasemantic commitments.

<sup>5</sup> A seminal example of this attitude is the treatment of the implementation challenge in Cappelen (2018, pp. 72; see also 73–75, 83–84), who defends what he calls the '*Inscrutable—Lack of Control—Will Keep Trying*' principle. The suspicion may arise at this point that skeptics about

argued that we have some control over concepts through our control over speaker meaning, or that we at least have the kind of collective long-term control over concepts that we have over the climate.<sup>6</sup> Whether or not we have control over concepts themselves, however, an underlying assumption shared by many different views—which is arguably implicit already in the framing of conceptual engineering as facing an implementation ‘challenge’—is that lack of control over conceptual *uptake*, i.e. over which concepts people in fact come to use, is a regrettable shortcoming.

But is it a shortcoming? What kind of picture of political life would be implied by our managing to fully obviate the implementation challenge? That is not merely a fanciful hypothetical scenario. We argue that the implementation challenge could in fact be fully overcome by institutionalizing mechanisms that coordinate and enforce uptake. The extent of anyone’s control over conceptual uptake to be itself something we can collectively control, and hence something that continuously and properly forms an object of political debate.

Against this backdrop, we then explore the political implications of institutionalizing the power easily to secure the uptake of any given concept, in the sense of being able not just to prescribe, but to enforce its quick uptake. Our contention will be that this could only be achieved in a way that goes against the very idea of liberal democratic politics, because there are inherent tensions between the ambition to overcome the

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control have a narrower ‘we’ in mind, and are only making a claim about the individual or about philosophers, but not about society as a whole. Yet Cappelen is adamant that his skepticism is insensitive to the scope of the ‘we’ in question (2018, p. 74).

<sup>6</sup> For an argument to the effect that Cappelen’s view largely denies us ‘individual immediate control’ but remains compatible with ‘collective long-range control,’ see Koch (2018); see also Pinder (2018, 2019).

implementation challenge and the ideals of liberal democracy. From these tensions, we draw a two-pronged liberal democratic rationale for making and keeping the implementation of conceptual engineering challenging.

First, we argue that the power effectively to implement conceptual engineering projects, however ameliorative, across a society's conceptual repertoire is incompatible with that society being a *liberal* society, in the undemanding sense of 'liberal' that Judith Shklar has spelled out under the heading of 'the liberalism of fear': a liberal society, in this sense, avoids unchecked concentrations of power to protect the less powerful against abuses of power by the more powerful, and the power to control the conceptual repertoire is just too open to such abuses to be compatible with liberalism. Even if we think that our conceptual repertoire needs revising and are confident that the power to control it would initially be used well, we have a *pro tanto* reason to relent from creating such a power for fear that it might be abused in the long run. This is the *liberal rationale* for keeping conceptual engineering hard to implement.

Second, we argue that the power effectively to implement conceptual engineering projects across a society's conceptual repertoire is incompatible with that society being a *democracy*. Democratic rule requires the consent of the governed. But giving any actor (either the state directly, or, in more complex cases, some private actor) the power to engineer concepts across the board is to give it the power to *engineer consent*, in particular by engineering the concepts of legitimacy on which consent depends. Since engineered consent is not real consent, limiting control over concepts must be part of what makes a society genuinely democratic: it ensures that democratic input does not lapse from being an effective constraint on power to being a mere effect of it. This is the *democratic rationale* for keeping conceptual engineering hard to implement.

Yet we also qualify our argument in two significant respects. To bring out the tensions between the ambition to overcome the implementation challenge and the ideals of liberalism and democracy, we focus, for the sake of clarity and vividness, on the consequences of *fully* overcoming that challenge. But there is of course a spectrum here: one might make conceptual engineering only marginally easier to implement at the cost of making society only marginally less liberal and democratic, and for all we need suppose, there might be compelling reasons in favor of accepting that trade-off. Our liberal democratic rationale for forswearing control is only meant to yield *pro tanto* reasons conditional on endorsing certain liberal democratic ideals, not *pro toto* reasons. What makes for an optimal resting point on that spectrum of trade-offs is a political question, not something that can be specified from the armchair. But the systematic tension that gives rise to these trade-offs, i.e. the tension at the level of principle, *can* be recognized from there, and it is in virtue of this systematic tension that our point against institutionalizing control over conceptual uptake holds not just for the limiting case, but more widely, its force shading off along the spectrum of control.

What will also become evident from the armchair, moreover—and this is the second qualification—is that there are specific contexts, such as professions that depend on regular and coordinated conceptual innovation, in which there are good reasons to institutionalize control over conceptual uptake. If done right, this can be locally achieved without undermining a society's liberal democratic credentials.

Outside of these special contexts, however, there is a liberal democratic rationale for ensuring that the implementation challenge remains challenging: so far from being a regrettable flaw, lack of control over conceptual uptake is a doubly essential feature of liberal democratic society. A society could not completely eliminate that feature without

sacrificing both what made it liberal and what made it democratic.

## 2. Controlling Control

Mark Richard (2020, p. 365) has compared the engineering of a new concept to the introduction of a new allele into a genetic population, an allele which may or may not go on to replicate, spread, and come to dominate in that population.<sup>7</sup> The analogy is richly suggestive and apt in many respects, but it invites us into a perspective from which the conceptual engineer has no control whatsoever over the uptake of a concept. The engineer can only lower the concept into the swirling waters of cultural evolution and hope, like a helpless castaway sending a message in a bottle, that the currents will be favorable.

This perspective on conceptual engineering renders it tempting to underestimate the extent to which we can influence which concepts win out, however. For one thing, even on the terms of Richard's allele analogy, it is important to remember that we can influence the natural environment to favor the propagation of certain alleles over others. A classic example is industrial melanism, whereby factory soot darkens the natural environment and thereby favors melanic alleles that darken body tissue and lead to better camouflage. The spread of the dark-colored peppered moth is such an evolutionary adaption to a human intervention in the natural environment: the industrial revolution made light-colored peppered moths stand out against trees in heavily coal-polluted areas, turning them into easy prey for birds; as a result, selective predation drove up the frequency of melanic alleles.<sup>8</sup> By analogy to industrial melanism, Mona Simion and Christoph Kelp (2020) have argued that we can purposefully generate new adaptive pressures on concepts

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<sup>7</sup> The analogy is more systematically elaborated in Richard (2019).

<sup>8</sup> See Cook and Saccheri (2013).

by changing the social and cultural context in which they are deployed.

Yet control over which concepts people use can become even more direct. It is possible to institutionalize mechanisms that catalyze or even come close to guaranteeing the uptake and enforcement of conceptual innovations. Authority over which concepts are to be used in a community of concept-users, such as a profession, can be centralized, and the processes of education, training, and continued admission and advancement in that community can be hierarchically organized and tightly regimented. We find such regimented, centralized, and hierarchical practices ensuring control over certain concepts in the medical profession, for instance, where much depends on two doctors understanding the same thing by a given medical term, and there are strong practical imperatives to establish and maintain a high degree of coordination and homogeneity within the conceptual repertoire in use at any given time. The World Health Organization publishes the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) and revises it at regular intervals, for example, thereby facilitating coordinated conceptual innovation between clinicians, lawyers, policymakers, regulatory agencies, the pharmaceutical industry, and health insurance companies.

Similarly, the legal profession has quite sophisticated tools to ensure that it has some control over its operative concepts: authority over what concepts should be used is centralized within a jurisdiction, and the recognition of that authority is itself regimented, hierarchically organized, and supported by an educational apparatus providing extensive legal training in prevailing conceptual norms and in the norms by which concepts are revised. These institutionalized uptake and enforcement mechanisms are designed to ensure that legal concepts retain not just a high degree of uniformity within a jurisdiction, but also a strong responsiveness to conceptual innovation from centralized authoritative

sources.

The extent to which there are such institutionalized mechanisms of control over conceptual uptake is a matter of the extent to which a society collectively decides to institutionalize such mechanisms. How much control there is over conceptual uptake is not simply something to be discovered, the way one might discover that human immune systems vary regionally, formed by localized exposure to pathogens. It is itself something societies have some control over, which makes it a political question about the shape those societies should take, and about how the power of the state should be deployed in this connection. In other words, how much control someone has over a concept's uptake is a *politically malleable parameter* that is responsive to collective deliberation and coordination about how far to institutionalize mechanisms designed to facilitate control over conceptual uptake. Even if it is true that we now largely lack such control, therefore, it does not follow that we could not change that.

Accordingly, the set of concepts at work in a society is better compared, for our purposes, to something *socially constructed* rather than biologically given; it is less like an autonomously evolving population of alleles, and more like a marketplace of ideas—an analogy that renders far more salient the possibility that we might (*pace* Mill) make it into a *tightly controlled* market if we only muster the political will to do so. The sense in which we, as a liberal democratic collective, control the extent of anyone's control over conceptual uptake is through our collective ability to decide to *institutionalize* such control. The question we now turn to is the question of the advisability of such



institutionalized control.

### 3. A Liberal Democratic Rationale for Forswearing Control

Is a lack of control over conceptual uptake really a flaw to be remedied? We noted that how much control we have over which concepts people use is a politically malleable parameter. But it is not malleable to the point that a liberal democratic society could decide to institutionalize conceptual implementation mechanisms across all domains of life *and still remain a liberal democratic society*. The total obviation of the implementation challenge implies a radically different picture of the state and civil society which is itself radically anti-liberal and anti-democratic. In this section, we develop a two-pronged liberal democratic rationale for forswearing control over the implementation of conceptual engineering, with the first prong emphasizing the ‘liberal’ half and the second the ‘democratic’ half of the idea of a liberal democratic society.

#### 3.1 Conceptual Engineering and the Liberalism of Fear

The first prong of the rationale—let us call it the *liberal* rationale—adapts to the topic of conceptual engineering an argument that Judith Shklar has made under the heading of the ‘liberalism of fear’ (1989). The upshot of the argument will be that institutionalizing the power effectively to implement conceptual engineering across a society’s conceptual repertoire is incompatible with that society being, in Shklar’s sense, a *liberal* society.

To see what the fear in question is a fear *of*, in this context, we must start from the basic point that conceptual engineering can be *deteriorative* as well as ameliorative, i.e. make things worse rather than better, and that we have reason to fear what seem to us

deteriorative changes in the conceptual repertoire.<sup>9</sup>

Deteriorative conceptual engineering has long been a central topic of dystopian and minatory fictions. George Orwell's fictitious language 'Newspeak,' carefully engineered to be a tool of oppression, is perhaps the best-known example. In an appendix on 'Newspeak,' Orwell meditates on how expunging all traces of the *political concept* of equality from the word 'equality' would turn the statement 'all men are equal' into 'a palpable untruth—i.e. that all men are of equal size, weight, or strength' (1981, p. 255).<sup>10</sup> Another powerful image of what the fully centralized and controlled manipulation of all kinds of concepts might actually look like is painted by Aldous Huxley in his detailed description of the workings of a 'World State' with five castes (called 'Alphas,' 'Betas,' 'Gammas,' 'Deltas,' and 'Epsilons'): while the caste vocabulary is shared by all, each caste is systematically recruited into a 'Class Consciousness,' i.e. trained to conceptualize its own caste as the best and take a dim view of other castes. This is achieved through training in early infancy, schooling, and relentless propaganda. But Huxley's most vivid image in this connection is that of *hypnopaedia*, the technique whereby people are surreptitiously inducted into a way of thinking in their sleep through exposure to messages such as the following:

Alpha children wear grey. They work much harder than we do, because they're so frightfully clever. I'm really awfully glad I'm a Beta, because I don't work so hard. And then we are much better than the Gammas and Deltas. Gammas are stupid. (Huxley,

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<sup>9</sup> See Marques (2020) and Shields (Forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> In his 'Politics and the English Language,' Orwell also prefigures present-day engineers in his insistence that language needs 'fixing,' in Cappelen's (2018) titular phrase. Because 'the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts' (2008, p. 270), Orwell argues in that essay, 'one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end' (2008, p. 286).

1932, pp. 22–23)

Before moving on to the next lesson in Class Consciousness, Huxley tells us, a Beta will have heard this ‘a hundred and twenty times three times a week for thirty months’ (1932, p. 23). The example is fictional and betrays a dated and exaggerated belief in the effectiveness of conditioning, but it is a powerful metonymic image of state-controlled, surreptitious, and deteriorative conceptual engineering. Indeed, Huxley himself intended it as a metonymic image for real forms of ‘tyranny over the mind,’ as he made clear in later essays published under that title (Huxley, 1958, ch. 10). And what Huxley’s depiction of the World State and its all-invading apparatus of mind control also reminds us of is just *how different* our social world would have to be for total control over concepts to become reality.

Once we focus on the darker side of conceptual engineering, it is striking that historically, many examinations of conceptual engineering were motivated by the fear, which they sought to impress upon their readers, of the alarming extent to which conceptual engineering *can* be implemented in a controlled fashion, especially once the apparatus of the modern state is deployed to this end. Moreover, they bring out how the most effective ways of controlling conceptual uptake also tend to be those that evade scrutiny: the dark side of conceptual engineering is dark not just in the sense of being driven by less benevolent motives, but also in the sense of being harder to see. A piece of conceptual engineering need not loudly announce itself as an innovation. It might follow a more clandestine script: people can be habituated, trained, or coaxed into adopting concepts. Advertising professionals and spin doctors carefully craft campaigns, videos, and billboards to this end. And political propagandists have long explored mechanisms for indoctrinating people, pushing them to toe the party line, instilling dumb awe at the

sight of their ruler, or encouraging the veneration of the regime's patriotic soldier-citizens.<sup>11</sup> Victor Klemperer, who chronicled the linguistic means through which the Nazis disseminated their ideology in his *The Language of the Third Reich*, describes how insidiously the concept of *heroism* had been engineered by the Nazi regime:

What a huge number of concepts and feelings [the language of Nazism] has corrupted and poisoned! ... I have observed again and again how the young people in all innocence, and despite a sincere effort to fill the gaps and eliminate the errors in their neglected education, cling to Nazi thought processes. They don't realize they are doing it; the remnants of linguistic usage from the preceding epoch confuse and seduce them. ... it was always just round the corner, someone spoke of some heroic behaviour or other, or of some heroic resistance, or simply heroism per se. As soon as this concept was even touched upon, everything became blurred, and we were adrift once again in the fog of Nazism. (2013, pp. 2–3)

To instill this concept of heroism, according to Klemperer, there was no need for a stipulative definition or an explicit imposition. It was simply that, for twelve years, the 'concept and vocabulary of heroism [had] increasingly and ever more exclusively [been] restricted to military bravery and foolhardy, death-defying behaviour in some military action or other' (2013, p. 5).<sup>12</sup> The Nazis succeeded in shaping the youth's concepts not just, and not even primarily, by explicitly decreeing whom they were allowed to call 'heroic,'

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<sup>11</sup> Here conceptual engineering productively intersects with the literature on public relations, manipulation, and propaganda; see for example Bernays (1969); Coons and Weber (2014); Fischer (2017); Fischer and Illies (2018); Herman and Chomsky (1988); MacLeod (2019); Mills (1995); Noggle (1996); Rudinow (1978); Stanley (2015, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> For more recent analyses of Nazi propaganda, see Doherty (2000) and Kallis (2005).

but by exposing them to an informational universe (newspapers, radio broadcasts, school books) in which patriotic soldier-citizens in uniform were tirelessly elevated by propaganda and hailed as ‘heroes.’

In light of these examples from bleak periods of the past and dystopian visions of the future, the ‘implementation challenge’ takes on a rather different hue. While examples of deteriorative engineering render it more plausible that we *could* institutionalize the power to control conceptual uptake, they also render it doubtful that we should *want* to do so. It should not be too easy for anyone to engineer people’s concepts, for we have reason to fear what might come of such power. Conceptual engineers with the power to impose their favored concepts across all domains of thought are normally found only in totalitarian states, where rulers dictate how certain words should be used and can rely on an all-encompassing propaganda and policing apparatus that coercively enforces uptake, censors competing concepts, and generally transforms minds into ideological modeling clay. This amounts to totalitarian thought control, in which people are forced to use concepts in conformity with the whims of the powerful rather than with the facts (as in the dark Soviet joke about the apparatchik who asks a mathematician: ‘How much is  $2 + 2$ ?’, and receives the cautious reply: ‘How much do you want it to be?’).<sup>13</sup> One cannot institutionalize the power to improve concepts without thereby also institutionalizing the risk of that power being abused. To protect the less powerful against such abuses, that power should be carefully limited.

This line of argument receives succor from Shklar’s ‘liberalism of fear’: the idea that the historical memory of past abuses of power and control justifies a liberalism animated by fear of what the powerful might do to the less powerful, and in particular justifies political

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<sup>13</sup> See Anderson (1995, p. 27).

arrangements designed to secure, for the less powerful, some measure of freedom from abuse of power and control. It is a fear fueled by the expectation—which Shklar takes to be ‘amply justified on every page of political history’—that ‘some agents of government will behave lawlessly and brutally in small or big ways most of the time unless they are prevented from doing so’ (1989, p. 28).

This yields an intellectually modest justification for a modestly nonutopian liberalism. The liberalism of fear makes fewer presuppositions than a Lockean liberalism of natural rights or a Millian liberalism of personal development, and its focus lies on damage control rather than on envisioning the perfect liberal state. It does not assume the existence of natural rights, or a moralized understanding of individual autonomy and its importance to the good life. All it presupposes is the historical recollection of the cruelty made possible by differences in power and control.<sup>14</sup> And what the liberalism of fear implies or encourages is not a picture of political life in which freedom is paramount, but rather a history-fueled suspicion of concentrations of power and control, and a corresponding preference for the separation and dispersion of power and control.<sup>15</sup> One might say that our argument explores the consequences for conceptual engineering of accepting Shklar’s starting point, namely the sense, fueled by her historical awareness of the failures of past utopian projects, that political organization should prioritize the prevention of the *summum malum* over the promotion of the *summum bonum*, and that we should allow

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<sup>14</sup> See Shklar (1989); she expands on the reasons to focus on the cruelty of the powerful as the *summum malum* (and not to let ‘ordinary vices’ such as hypocrisy and snobbery distract from it) in Shklar (1984).

<sup>15</sup> See Williams (2005), who writes that the liberalism of fear implies ‘a pluralism of powerful institutions’ (55). On the liberal rationale for the dispersion of power, see also Bagg (Forthcoming).

institutions only as much power as we are willing to risk landing in the wrong hands.

Importantly, this is not simply the idea that we should prefer a weak state for fear of what a strong one might do in the wrong hands. The liberalism of fear allows for the possibility that what *we* have most reason to fear is precisely a weak state that is impotent to prevent powerful private actors from taking advantage of less powerful private actors. The basic units of analysis of the liberalism of fear are not ‘public’ and ‘private,’ but ‘weak’ and ‘powerful’ (Shklar, 1989, p. 27). Beyond that, it usefully leaves open what falls into each category in a given context—the powerful might include international institutions, private actors, or, indeed, the ideologically influential.<sup>16</sup>

It might be objected that whether a liberalism-of-fear argument is compelling in this context rests in large part on how one evaluates our current conceptual repertoire. What if conceptual oppression is already rampant? The very fear of conceptual oppression that is supposed to motivate our making even ameliorative conceptual engineering difficult to implement would then in fact be at risk of being *realized by* our making ameliorative conceptual engineering difficult to implement.<sup>17</sup> We can label this the *counterproductivity worry*: in a society in which conceptual oppression is already rampant, making and keeping engineering challenging to implement appears inherently counterproductive.

Our response to this counter-productivity worry comes in two parts. To begin with, we can distinguish between (a) fear of conceptual oppression, i.e. of the concepts at work in society having oppressive and unjust effects; and (b) fear of abuses of the power to control conceptual uptake. As we conceive of the liberalism of fear, it is primarily concerned with

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<sup>16</sup> As Jan-Werner Müller notes, the liberalism of fear is purposefully open-ended and purposefully leaves the concept of liberty undertheorized; it thereby ‘allows men and women to be critics, without a fully agreed philosophy and even without a permanent cause’ (2015, p. 56).

<sup>17</sup> We are indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this line of argument.

(b): the liberal's fear is, *in the first instance*, directed at what the powerful might do to the powerless, which is why that fear motivates the kind of limitation and dispersion of power that will make abuses of power less likely. Of course, this is not to say that the widespread currency of oppressive concepts is of no concern to the Shklarian liberal. But the liberalism of fear is a theoretical lens that focuses attention not so much on specific outcomes as on the underlying processes and configurations of power that produce them: seen through this lens, conceptual oppression is merely *one product* of the abuse of power, and hardly the worst.

Moreover, insofar as even the Shklarian liberal has reason to eliminate existing conceptual oppression, institutionalizing control over conceptual uptake is not a particularly promising strategy: new powers tend to be vulnerable to appropriation by the already powerful, and since the already powerful also tend to be those who benefit from conceptual oppression, they have incentives to use their new powers to prevent rather than promote conceptual change. And even if they do in fact use their power to successfully eliminate existing forms of conceptual oppression, the sheer existence of such a power raises the specter of its being subsequently abused in some other way. We cannot institutionalize a power that will cut through knotty politics and simply *impose* radical improvements without risking its being put to other uses. The prospect of a power that will transcend liberal democratic politics, unencumbered by the need to persuade, never ceases to be tempting; because any such power is likely to end up being appropriated by the already powerful or abused by the newly powerful, however, it is a temptation we have reason to resist.

The liberalism of fear thus provides the first prong of a two-pronged rationale for making and keeping conceptual uptake hard to control. We should not want it to be too



easy to control people's concepts for fear of how this power and control might be used, and we should be wary of concentrations of that kind of power and control, especially when they are not adequately checked by countervailing influences. From the point of view of the liberalism of fear, lack of control over people's concepts then appears as a feature rather than a flaw, and if the well-intentioned conceptual engineer faces a formidable implementation challenge, this may be regrettable from the point of view of the engineer, but it is at the same time a liberal achievement. As Shklar notes: 'No theory that gives public authorities the unconditional right to impose beliefs and even a vocabulary as they may see fit upon the citizenry can be described as even remotely liberal' (1989, p. 24).

One might object that the power to impose concepts or 'a vocabulary' is not as threatening, from a liberal point of view, as the power to impose beliefs. After all, the imposition of concepts leaves people with one more degree of freedom, since it does not predetermine *which* beliefs they form using the imposed concepts. If the ultimate aim is to instill the belief that  $x$  is  $F$  (say, that the government is legitimate), then imposing a certain *concept* of legitimacy instead of directly instilling the *belief* that the government is legitimate seems to leave open the possibility of judging that  $x$  is not  $F$ , i.e. that the government is not legitimate. Control over concepts looks less illiberal than control over beliefs. Yet this impression is quickly dispelled once we consider that a given concept  $F$  may, as David Wiggins has emphasized, leave one 'nothing else to think but that'  $x$  is  $F$ .<sup>18</sup> A well-designed concept of legitimacy can be tailored to ensure that *for those who use that particular concept* of legitimacy in a particular state, the only reasonable conclusion to be drawn is that the government is in fact legitimate, since it meets all the criteria for the application of a concept *the point of which* is to ensure that this government should meet

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<sup>18</sup> See Wiggins (1990).

them. Hence, the power to recruit people into using certain concepts rather than others can be an effective way of determining what beliefs they form. Just as there is a liberal rationale for being wary of the power to control belief formation, therefore, there is a liberal rationale for being wary of the power to control conceptual uptake.

### 3.2 *The Democratic Politics of Implementation and the Engineering of Consent*

We come now to the second prong—let us call it the *democratic* rationale—of our two-pronged rationale for making and keeping conceptual engineering hard to implement. At first pass, one might think that handing a democratic polity the tools to effectively enforce improvements to its conceptual repertoire promises to strengthen democracy: it would endow it with the power to clear out whatever ideological rot menaces its stability.<sup>19</sup>

There is an inherent incompatibility between democracy and the power effectively to control conceptual uptake across a society's conceptual repertoire, however. Democracy—let us assume—requires the consent of the governed. But giving any actor (be it the state, or, in more complex cases, some private actor such as a corporation) the power to control conceptual uptake across the board is to give it the power to *engineer consent*, in particular by controlling *on which concepts of legitimacy* that consent turns. And because engineered consent is not real consent, limiting control over conceptual uptake is an essential requirement on genuine democracy.

To substantiate this claim, we can start from the observation that characterizing a conceptual engineering project as 'ameliorative' can appear question-begging. As Marques (2020) points out, this is particularly so when the grounds for regarding a piece of engineering as an improvement cannot in the end remain purely *epistemic*, the way that

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<sup>19</sup> We are indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this observation.

Simion (2018) and Podosky (2018) make them out to be. Even if we accept the idea that we have *pro tanto* reasons to use concepts that enable us to articulate knowledge or truths, it does not follow that we want our conceptual apparatus to enable us to articulate *any and all* truths. In virtue of their needs, values, and interests, people will find it more worthwhile to articulate certain truths rather than others, and people with different needs, values, and interests can reasonably disagree over which truths these are.<sup>20</sup> Even if we consider the question of conceptual amelioration in narrowly epistemic terms, therefore, we cannot entirely wring the politics out of conceptual engineering. And of course, once we factor in other significant effects of concepts besides their truth-conduciveness—their immediate psychological effects in channeling concept-users’ emotions and attention and prompting their memory and imagination in certain ways, for instance, but also the variety of more distal socio-political effects that the concepts’ wider uptake can be expected to have—people will have all the more room to differ over what they regard as an ‘ameliorative’ intervention in the conceptual repertoire.

To render these disagreements more analytically tractable, it helps to think of any concrete proposal for ameliorative conceptual engineering as having to pass through two choice points concerning its ends and means: (i) the choice of a *goal* in the service of which to engineer concepts; and (ii) the choice of a *concept* through which to work towards the realization of that goal. There is room for reasonable disagreement at both choice points. That people disagree about what goals to pursue is one of the basic facts of politics. But even where there is agreement on a goal, which concepts in fact constitute the best way to pursue that goal is epistemically opaque in a way that does not necessarily admit of a clear *ex ante* answer. Good intentions are one thing, the actual effects of a proposed concept

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<sup>20</sup> See Queloz (2021, pp. 2, 219–20, 235, 240).

becoming widespread quite another. What unintended consequences might the uptake of this concept have? How might the concept be repurposed or abused? Nietzsche's conceptual innovations of the *will to power* and the *Übermensch*, for example, ended up being exploited by just the nationalistic and anti-Semitic political movements he abhorred. And even the *prima facie* benign concept of *human rights* has been criticised for helping to legitimate Western interventions in the post-colonial era (Moyn, 2010) and exacerbating global inequality by focusing attention on sufficiency rather than equality (Moyn, 2018). Even if we are confident that a proposed concept is unlikely to prove harmful, moreover, how do we know that it will promote the agreed goal better than a rival concept? These many layers of epistemic opacity all create room for reasonable disagreement: people who agree on what goals to pursue may yet reasonably disagree over what concepts to pursue them with.

The democratic way to handle such disagreements is to treat them not as purely technical matters to be resolved once and for all through sufficiently rigorous philosophical scrutiny, but as political matters to be decided through a political process taking some form of democratic input. One could have a body of democratically elected representatives vote on how to ameliorate the conceptual repertoire, for example. But notice that such a democratic resolution of disagreements over the means and ends of conceptual engineering would not obviously preclude the far-reaching institutionalization of control over conceptual uptake: in principle, the democratic body could hand down its decision to a centralized implementation agency with the powers necessary to enforce it. This combination of democratic deliberation with centralized implementation would promise to make conceptual engineering both democratic and easy to implement. If, as we aim to argue in this section, conceptual engineering that is easy to implement is

*undemocratic*, then, this cannot be because a lack of control over concepts is indispensable to the democratic resolution of disagreements over how to engineer concepts; for all that our argument has shown thus far, there could be an implementation agency with formidable enforcement powers that nonetheless took democratic input.

The point must be, rather, that a society in which a centralized agency can easily implement conceptual engineering is undemocratic not, or not primarily, because the engineering lacks democratic *input*, but rather because its *output* threatens to erode democracy over time (thereby eventually also undermining the input's claim to being genuinely democratic). To see why, consider a society that combines all the characteristic trappings of democratic processes of governance and deliberation, such as open elections and decision-making by majority vote, with a powerful centralized Ministry of Conceptual Engineering capable of exercising a great deal of control over which concepts people come to use in any given area of life. The fact that the power to determine in what terms people conceptualize things rests largely with a centralized authority imperils the society's claim to being genuinely democratic; for in virtue of being able to determine in what terms people think, the government is in a position to cloud and warp people's understanding of their own interests, stint their sense of what is possible, and bias their electoral choices as well as their collective deliberation. The institutionalization of that kind of power fatally undermines democracy on just about any conception of it, whether economic, epistemic, or deliberative.<sup>21</sup>

The fundamental reason why such a power is incompatible with democracy is that democracy requires the consent of the governed, and the institutionalization of a power capable of fully overcoming the implementation challenge threatens to turn the consent

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<sup>21</sup> See Stanley (2015, pp. 11–12).

of the governed from a serious *constraint on* power into a mere *product of* power. Liberal democracy rests on the idea that exercises of power have to be discursively justified and are accepted as legitimate based on reasons.<sup>22</sup> If the aspiration to render conceptual engineering easy to implement is inimical to democracy, it is because it raises the threat of this power over concepts being directed towards those very reasons. Controlling conceptual uptake in general means controlling through which concepts the governed distinguish between *legitimate* and *illegitimate* exercises of power. But if the powerful get to determine what *counts* as a legitimate or illegitimate exercise of their power, they can effectively engineer the legitimacy of any exercise of power whatsoever: legitimacy becomes an effect of their power rather than a constraint on it. Conceptual engineering then becomes what the propaganda and public relations pioneer Edward Bernays called ‘the engineering of consent’ (1969), and engineered consent is not real consent.<sup>23</sup>

Seemingly democratic processes of governance and deliberation thus cannot be genuinely democratic unless the power to determine in what terms people think is itself democratically distributed across society. If a democratic body were given the power to exercise full control over conceptual uptake, the exercise of that power would eventually risk feeding back into the formation and operation of that body in ways that would undermine its democratic legitimacy.<sup>24</sup> It is because of this deep structural connection between the freedom of thought and the capacity to provide genuinely democratic input

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<sup>22</sup> For elaborations of this point that bring out the crucial role of *legitimizing concepts* in particular, see Cueni and Queloz (2021) and Cueni (2020).

<sup>23</sup> For a historical overview of Bernays’ pioneering role in the field of public relations and propaganda, see Tye (1998).

<sup>24</sup> A process highlighted notably by Weber (1967, pp. 335–36).

that institutionalizing control over conceptual uptake erodes democracy.

Besides a liberal rationale, there is thus also a democratic rationale for limiting control over conceptual uptake. Because of the connection between the freedom of thought and the capacity to provide genuinely democratic input, the absence of institutionalized power over conceptual uptake is part of what makes a society democratic.

Of course, it does not follow that institutionalizing control over conceptual uptake is always bad for democracy. As we saw in §2, there are certain professions and domains of thought in which even a democracy has good reasons to increase control over concepts. Some domains, such as the legal profession and the health care sector, depend on institutional structures that ensure the uptake and enforcement of conceptual innovations, because there are strong practical pressures to coordinate on a single harmonized technical terminology. And while Oliver Wendell Holmes could still confidently write that ‘the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas’ and that ‘the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market,’<sup>25</sup> the twenty-first century marketplace of ideas, with its social media networks and bot farms, makes one less confident in the capacity of an unregulated ‘marketplace of ideas’ to converge on the concepts we really want. What if Gresham’s law were to hold for concepts as well, so that ‘bad’ concepts drive out the ‘good’? Just as the state has good reasons (e.g., of efficiency and justice) to allocate certain goods on the basis of non-market principles and to regulate certain markets, so there are reasons to centralize control over conceptual uptake in the hands of particular bodies in certain parts of the marketplace of ideas.

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<sup>25</sup> *Abrams v. United States*, 250 U.S. 616 (1919), J. Holmes dissenting, at 630. The context is Holmes’s defence of the First Amendment. For an assessment of the legal and historical significance of the case, see Healy (2014).

Nothing about the connection between freedom of thought and democracy entails that the marketplace of ideas should be entirely unregulated. After all, even places that traditionally put great emphasis on the protection of freedom of thought and speech, such as universities and courts of law, regulate who can speak, who can listen, and when.<sup>26</sup>

But even the local institutionalization of control over conceptual uptake needs to take a certain form if it is to maintain its consonance with democratic political arrangements. Here it once again becomes important that ameliorative conceptual engineering is not merely a technical matter, like clearing a radio channel from static, but allows for reasonable disagreements over ends and means due to the political nature and epistemic opacity of the questions involved. This calls for political checks on control.

In liberal democracies, three such political checks are *restriction to a domain*, *transparency*, and *accountability*. First, institutionalized control over conceptual uptake should be confined, ideally, to the associative bodies of certain professions, whose power is narrowly restricted to a particular domain. Second, conceptual engineering should ideally be transparently declared as such; the contemporary philosophical literature, with its openly revisionist stipulative definitions backed by reasons to adopt them, tends to reflect that ideal.<sup>27</sup> And third, conceptual engineers with the power to implement their proposed changes should be held accountable, for instance by democratically organizing the associative bodies doing the engineering, so that those in charge can be voted out if

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<sup>26</sup> See Post (1995) and Williams (2002, p. 217).

<sup>27</sup> Although, as Plunkett and Sundell (2013a) emphasize, disagreements over which concepts to use, though metalinguistic in nature, need not be *fought out* at the metalinguistic level, but can be dressed up in first-order language that does not explicitly declare itself as a piece of conceptual engineering. They suggest that such ‘metalinguistic negotiations’ are ubiquitous in ordinary as much as in philosophical settings. See also Plunkett and Sundell (2013b), Plunkett (2015), and McPherson and Plunkett (2020).



they use their power irresponsibly.

These checks also mutually reinforce each other. Restricting control over conceptual uptake to certain domains helps to secure accountability, for example, since it allows those who enjoy a certain control to be accountable to people that are *outside* the reach of that control. And beyond those restricted contexts, liberal democratic societies have a strong presumption in favor of ensuring that concepts openly compete with each other by keeping control over conceptual uptake limited and diffused.

Of course, that kind of compartmentalization between ‘domains’ where we accept and institutionalize power and control over conceptual uptake and domains where we do not requires us to draw a line somewhere, and that carries its own difficulties. The distinction between acceptable and unacceptable forms of control over conceptual uptake is a species of the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable forms of persuasion, and articulating such a distinction in any principled way and at a general level is notoriously hard. Certainly, the distinction does not simply line up with the distinction between merely causal force or coercion and the rational power of reason and argument. For one thing, the latter cannot be cleanly extricated from the former, as even the purest real-life examples of the power of reason involve non-rational influences, such as the persuasive power of charisma. We therefore cannot distinguish acceptable from unacceptable forms of control over conceptual uptake simply by saying that acceptable control is control in an Ideal Speech Situation *à la* Habermas that is completely free of distortion by power or *Herrschaft*.<sup>28</sup> If we ruled out any concept whose uptake is partly the effect of someone’s power, there would be no concepts left to think with.

Moreover, there are many forms of persuasion through merely causal forces and even

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<sup>28</sup> See Habermas (1970). See Queloz (2022) for an elaboration of this point.

coercion that we are evidently willing to accept. The point is particularly clear in the case of education. There is a sense in which today's education notably involves the implementation of yesterday's conceptual engineering: pupils are taught to think in terms of the concepts developed or advocated by the previous generation of linguists, mathematicians, historians, biologists, climate scientists, etc. Ideally, their education culminates in the development of the capacity to reflect critically about these concepts; but this capacity comes later, on the back of having been enculturated into using these concepts uncritically at first. To this end, educational institutions are organized to imbue teachers with a considerable amount of control over pupils' concepts, and the form that this control takes is hardly entirely free of coercion. As Bernard Williams observed, '[p]upils enter education, most often, under some kind of coercion, and some of them stay in it and listen only for those same reasons. If they have a good teacher, those reasons fall away, but the good teacher will have substituted other powers of persuasion for those' (2002, p. 226).

Why do liberal democratic societies characteristically accept this partly coercive implementation of conceptual engineering for the basic concepts of geometry and arithmetic, but reject a comparably heavy-handed approach in politics? Our examination of the ways in which such an approach would be in tension with the political values of liberalism and democracy offers part of the answer. Restraint in this domain is itself a central expression of liberal democratic political values. It expresses a wariness of abuses of power over political concepts such as legitimacy. But it also expresses respect for pluralism and for the political contestation of the majority will. Liberal democratic societies characteristically forswear control over political concepts because they take seriously the political significance of respecting people's freedom in conceptualizing

political values like legitimacy, equality, liberty, or justice differently, both from each other and from the state.

Beyond these red lines, however, the tradition of liberal democratic thought leaves itself few means by which to draw a sharp distinction between good and bad control over conceptual uptake, or between better or worse concepts. It has some tools, such as the harm principle, but it denies itself appeals to a single, uniquely authoritative (because natural or divinely sanctioned) conceptual scheme. Instead, it aims to construct a framework within which people can non-violently and respectfully disagree with each other about which concepts are best, and offers them peaceful ways to resolve these disagreements through political processes. It is essential to its being a *democratic* disagreement, however, that it should be conducted in an open forum of rational debate, in which the powers of any one side to implement its prescriptions are, by definition, limited. Both how we should improve our conceptual repertoire, and which forms of control over conceptual uptake we are willing to accept, are irreducibly political questions. A democracy deserving of the term will accordingly treat these questions as calling for a democratic input that is itself sufficiently independent from power to be an effective constraint on it.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The implementation challenge can thus in principle be fully overcome, but only by going against the very idea of liberal democratic politics. There is therefore a limit to how far liberal democratic conceptual engineers can consistently regret their lack of control over conceptual uptake. To be sure, the philosophers framing implementation as a ‘challenge’ and exploring how that challenge might be overcome are not thereby automatically

advocating the institution of a Ministry of Conceptual Engineering—that is merely a particularly vivid limiting case. But in venturing down the road of trying to overcome the implementation challenge, it is helpful to be clear about what lies at the end of it, and why implementation should seem challenging to begin with.

While accommodating the fact that some limited amount of control over conceptual uptake is a good thing in certain contexts, we have sought to bring out the respects in which the power to implement and enforce conceptual engineering, however benevolent in intention and ameliorative in effect, is inherently inimical to liberal democratic politics. In a liberal democracy, institutionalized mechanisms facilitating implementation should be limited to domains that absolutely depend on them for good practical reasons, such as the legal and medical professions, and absent otherwise. This is not to say that we should make it impossible to implement conceptual change. It is only to say that the ideals of liberal democratic politics give us *pro tanto* reasons to keep conceptual engineering challenging to implement by making it require persuasion. It is one thing to have people or institutions who claim the epistemic or moral authority to tell us which concepts to use. It is quite another for them to have the power to forcibly implement these conceptual changes. Having the power to prescribe without the power to enforce may not always be efficient or effective; but this enforcement gap is an essential feature of liberal democracy. It is a defense against abuses of power and control, and it acknowledges the political dimension of the question of what concepts should be promulgated and how.

If we lack control over the implementation of conceptual engineering, then, it is in no small part because we have made it so, and for good reason. The liberal fear of the power to control conceptual uptake ending up in the wrong hands, combined with the democratic demand for freedom of thought as a precondition of genuine consent, yields a

two-pronged liberal democratic rationale for keeping implementation challenging. Realizing this does not so much settle the question of how to pursue conceptual engineering as open up a broader area of research: if we take seriously the political significance of concepts, what sorts of institutional mechanisms for managing concepts are in fact most compatible with given conceptions of legitimacy, liberty, equality, justice, and other important political values? That is the fruitful area of intersection between conceptual engineering and political philosophy that we hope to have staked out for further investigation.<sup>29</sup>

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