

## Conceptual Engineering, Conceptual Domination, and the Case of Conspiracy Theories

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**Abstract:** Using the example of recent attempts to engineer the concept of conspiracy theory, I argue that philosophers should be far more circumspect in their approach to conceptual engineering than we have been – in particular, that we should pay much closer attention to the history behind and context that surrounds our target concept in order to determine whether it is a site of what I have elsewhere called ‘conceptual domination’. If it is, we may well have good reason to avoid engineering. In their recent ‘What is a Conspiracy Theory?’, M. Giulia Napolitano and Kevin Reuter argue that the disagreement between generalists and particularists in the literature on conspiracy theories is best characterized as a set of dueling conceptual engineering projects. While I agree with their turn to this metaphilosophical literature, I give a very different account of its applicability. Particularists, on my account, are better read as aiming to diagnose the ways in which many discussions of the concept of conspiracy theories are a form of conceptual domination, where this broader context should then prompt us to abandon or block any concept of conspiracy theory that treats its referents as inherently defective. Broader metaphilosophical lessons are drawn.

**Keywords:** conceptual engineering; conceptual abandonment conspiracy theories; inquiry; conceptual domination

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Conceptual engineering seems to be all the rage among philosophers at the moment. Here I play the role of resident stick-in-the-mud, at least in part.<sup>1</sup> I argue that philosophers should be more circumspect in our approach to conceptual engineering than we have been – in particular, that we should pay much closer attention to the history behind and context that surrounds our target concepts. Before undertaking an engineering project, we should determine whether there are regular attempts to impose the target concept on others, especially by speakers vested with formal institutional authority. Speakers will often attempt this imposition to further interests of theirs that have nothing to do with—that in fact prevent—the flourishing of inquiry. If our target concept is primarily a site of this process of conceptual domination (as I have called it elsewhere), then we may

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<sup>1</sup> Though I do not always play this role! I also think elements of this enthusiasm are warranted and have contributed in this vein to the literature (e.g., Shields (2021b)). Moreover, increased vigilance regarding whether our target concepts are sites of conceptual domination can, in my view, help contribute to *better* conceptual engineering projects, as I explain in the final section.

have good reason to avoid engineering projects regarding the concept (2021a).<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I argue that we should approach certain attempts to engineer the concept *conspiracy theory* with just such skepticism.

One of the central divides in the literature on conspiracy theories concerns the question of how we define the term. Do we build in a negative component, where conspiracy theories are inherently epistemically defective (as generalists argue), or do we opt for a neutral formulation (in line with particularists' views) and therefore evaluate the merits of conspiracy theories on a case-by-case basis? Given that this debate turns on the question of how to arrive at an understanding of a particular concept, we would do well to turn to our best, current metaphilosophical work on conceptual analysis to try and make progress on these questions.<sup>3</sup> In a recent paper, M. Giulia Napolitano and Kevin Reuter have taken just this approach and argued that we should re-interpret the generalism-particularism camps as primarily advancing dueling conceptual engineering projects (2021). On the one hand, we have 'claims made by Coady, Basham, and Dentith that *conspiracy theory* should be ameliorated...[by] eliminating the evaluative' component of the concept; the concept should instead be treated as neutral (2021, 22). On the other hand, in line with a more generalist approach, Napolitano and Reuter argue that 'the best strategy for defining conspiracy theory is to engineer the evaluative concept to encode specific epistemic deficiencies' (2021, 25). For sake of brevity and clarity, I will use '*conspiracy theory*' to refer to Napolitano and Reuter's negatively evaluative concept.<sup>4</sup> Napolitano and Reuter then argue (on the basis of several interesting studies) that their *conspiracy theory*<sub>e</sub> should be preferred because it preserves continuity with ordinary usage of the concept and therefore allows for empirical study of a phenomenon of public interest.<sup>5</sup>

I pursue two main lines of argument in this paper – one more specific to the conspiracy theory literature, the other more general regarding broader lessons for philosophical methodology. In the paper's first section, I clarify my account of conceptual domination. I then argue in the second section that Napolitano and Reuter misconstrue the views of particularists in a way that poses significant problems for their engineering project. I show that the particularist views on offer are not primarily engaged in conceptual engineering. I argue that we are best off understanding their project as diagnosing *conspiracy theory*<sub>e</sub> as a site of conceptual domination and as aiming to push back intellectually against this form of domination without necessarily pursuing engineering in turn. In the third section, I consider an objection Napolitano and Reuter might use to resist my account of particularism. I then argue in the paper's fourth and final section that Napolitano and Reuter's missteps illuminate a broader challenge for conceptual engineering projects – that, as philosophers, we should be very circumspect regarding engineering concepts that are primarily sites of conceptual domination.

## 1. Conceptual Domination

As I explain in my 2021a, the conceptual engineering and conceptual ethics literature largely subscribes to what I call the 'Inquiry Assumption'. When approaching conceptual disputes, philosophers have tended to assume that 'when speakers claim we should think or talk about a

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<sup>2</sup> For kindred work, see Marques (2020), Queloz and Bieber (2021), and Podosky (2022).

<sup>3</sup> In separate pieces, both Julia Duetz (forthcoming) and Melina Tsapos (forthcoming) look at similar issues around the conceptual engineering of *conspiracy theory* (Duetz) and *conspiracy theorist* (Tsapos).

<sup>4</sup> I use italics for referring to concepts or meanings. I use single quotes for mentioning terms and for excerpts from texts and double quotes for scare quoting.

<sup>5</sup> In this paper, I take for granted the results of Napolitano and Reuter's own studies regarding ordinary usage surrounding 'conspiracy theory'. My concern here is with their methodological approach and construal of alternative views.

concept in a particular way, they do so because they are convinced that this is the correct or best view of the concept and are thus *motivated* by and *committed* to the goal of arriving at the correct or the best view of this concept' (2021, 15044).<sup>6</sup> That is, philosophers tend to assume that the participants in the conceptual disputes are genuine inquirers.

Consider, for example, one of David Plunkett and Tim Sundell's paradigmatic cases of a conceptual dispute and, on their preferred approach to conceptual ethics, a form of metalinguistic negotiation. We are asked to consider two speakers, one who subscribes to the early 2000s U.S. Department of Justice's restrictive view of *torture* that rules out many practices from counting as such and the other who subscribes to the U.N.'s more expansive view of *torture* that rules in many of these same practices. The first utters, 'Waterboarding is not torture', while the second replies, 'Waterboarding is torture'. Here is how Plunkett and Sundell gloss the exchange:

'Even if we suppose that the speakers mean different things by the word 'torture', it is clear that we have not exhausted the normative and evaluative work to be done here. After all, in the context of discussions about the moral or legal issues surrounding the treatment of prisoners, there is a substantive question about which definition is *better*' (2013, 19).

The two speakers therefore carry out, without realizing it, a metalinguistic negotiation regarding the term 'torture' or concept *torture*; they are not making an assertion about what our understanding of this term or concept in fact consists in. They are tacitly advocating that their preferred 'usage is [the one] appropriate to those moral or legal discussions' (2013, 19).<sup>7</sup>

Although Plunkett and Sundell do not comment on this detail, the view of *torture* advanced by their first speaker is in fact from the infamous 'Torture Memos' authored by the Bush administration's Department of Justice. Here is legal scholar and philosopher David Luban on the Memos in testimony given to U.S. Congress. The Memos:

'[F]all far short of professional standards of candid advice and independent judgment. They involve a selective and in places deeply eccentric reading of the law. The memos cherry-pick sources of law that back their conclusions, and leave out sources of law that do not. They read as if they were reverse engineered to reach a pre-determined outcome: approval of waterboarding and the other CIA techniques' (2009, 1–2).

If Luban's assessment is right, then these speakers were not invested in arriving at the usage or understanding of this concept that is 'appropriate to [these] moral or legal discussions', as Plunkett and Sundell claim. These speakers were instead concerned to arrive at a view of this concept that served their political interests above all else, *regardless* of how genuine inquirers would come down on the question.

Note that the point here is not that the political project of these speakers' is objectionable (though, to this author, it clearly is); the point is that there is a difference between speakers who are

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<sup>6</sup> The language of 'correct or best view of the concept' is drawn from the literature itself: most philosophers in the area, including, for example, Sally Haslanger and Herman Cappelen, opt for 'best' or 'better'-style formulations of conceptual engineering (e.g., Haslanger's 'What concept (if any) would do that work best?'), whereas others, including, for example, Sarah Sawyer, use the language of correctness (Haslanger 2012, 223; Cappelen 2018; Sawyer 2018).

<sup>7</sup> In a passage similarly representative of the role of the Inquiry Assumption, Cappelen cites legal disputes over how we should think and talk about the terms "murder", "fetus", "intention", "person", and "tax" as examples of conceptual engineering, where these cases involve 'extensive, explicit debate and theorizing' (2018, 27). The possibility that these conceptual disputes might involve speakers who do not have an overriding interest in 'debate and theorizing' is left unexplored.

mistaken, even repugnantly so, and speakers who have no investment in arriving at the correct or best view of the concept, but are engaged in the dispute for non-inquiry reasons. Such speakers are engaged in ‘conceptual domination’: they advance a view of a concept ‘because this view serves their interests that are either irrelevant to or actively interfere with inquiry concerning this concept – paradigmatically (but not exclusively) their material interests’ (Shields 2021, 15046).

There are various questions we can ask in order to determine whether we are encountering instances of conceptual domination in the wild. These questions are important because many speakers will insist they are engaging in inquiry-driven conceptual engineering to ward off criticism and promote their credibility in the eyes of various audiences. We can ask whether the speakers:

- (1) Are engaged in markedly deficient practices of inquiry;
- (2) Exploit their formal or informal institutional authority to settle the conceptual dispute;
- (3) Are unwilling to defend their view of the concept to relevant experts;
- (4) Fail to be transparent about the interests informing or potentially informing their view.

While these conditions are not dispositive, they give us good evidence for determining whether target speakers in a conceptual dispute are engaging in conceptual domination or conceptual engineering. We can then respond in more apt ways. If, for example, we have good reason to think that speakers are inquiry-driven, then we should engage them at the level of argument, explaining as well as we can why we take them to be mistaken. If, however, we have good reason to think their interventions are not inquiry-driven, then we should aim to expose them as such and the interests driving their activity. We may want to resist engaging them as engineers to avoid providing them with the cover and credibility of counting as genuine inquirers. We may also want to push for abandoning the concept in question. (More on this option in the following section.) A great deal turns on the particulars of the case at hand, and judgments about particular speakers and circumstances will of course often prove difficult.

Two points of further clarification are important. First, on my account, one does not need to intend to engage in conceptual domination in order to count as doing so. The above four sources of evidence are much better indicators of a speaker’s status than mere avowals or first-person judgments: many will deny being engaged in conceptual domination given its negative association and the potential loss of credibility. Furthermore, we are not transparent to ourselves: we may simply be unaware of the nature of our actions.

Second, in presenting this account, I sometimes encounter the objection that there is no distinction to be made between engineers and dominators in terms of inquiry: dominators are simply inquiring into a view of a concept that best serves *their* interests. Why not then call such figures ‘inquirers’? Two responses: first, my account allows that conceptual dominators can engage in inquiry in various contexts since it may well suit their needs to do so. But they will nonetheless lack an *overriding* commitment to inquiry. The lack of such a commitment will be particularly apparent when inquiry unfolds in ways that contradict their interests; it will then be suppressed or ignored, and the speaker will retain their original position.

Second, the objector’s insistence that any difference between dominators and engineers lies in their ends and not their practices of inquiry leaves unclear why dominators count as dominators. If, as the objector claims, the dominator is a genuine inquirer, then it is unclear in what sense they are aiming to impose their view on others. The objector might bite the bullet, however. They might argue that there is no relevant distinction between these two figures other than the ends to which they hold themselves accountable: we simply dislike the ends of those we call ‘dominators’ and endorse the ends of those we call ‘engineers’.

I view this approach as a non-starter. For reasons I can only preview here, it is unclear to me how we can make sense of inquiry at all if we do not fundamentally distinguish between speakers who take themselves to be accountable to the truth or what is correct in some domain and those who seek out only whatever helps promote an outcome they have already settled on regardless of the evidence. I agree with Cheryl Misak that ‘someone who is prepared to say in advance that she will not revise a certain judgement, no matter what evidence may come to light against it...is not engaging in genuine inquiry, is not aiming at truth, and does not have a genuine belief’ (2000, 87).<sup>8</sup>

Sally Haslanger herself seems aware of the importance of this distinction, emphasizing that the goal of conceptual engineering is ‘enhancing our conceptual resources to serve our (critically examined) purposes’ (2012, 368). Presumably, such purposes must be ‘critically examined’ because otherwise we would simply be aiming to impose our view on others. Haslanger, however, does not tell us about what conceptual dispute might look like *absent* such critical examination, and it is my account of conceptual domination that seeks to fill this gap.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Revisiting Particularism

With this framework of conceptual domination in mind, let’s turn now to the particularists about conspiracy theories. Particularists argue that we should judge the epistemic merits of conspiracy theories on a case-by-case basis. The primary argument for this view is that there are an enormous number of conspiracies that we know obtain from the historical record and in our contemporary political lives. It would therefore be an epistemic and political disaster were we to indict such views *a priori*.

Napolitano and Reuter argue that, for particularists, ‘the main function that the evaluative *conspiracy theory* plays in society is that of serving the interest of the powerful by discouraging people from investigating conspiracies’ (2021, 8).<sup>10</sup> Now it is true that particularists sometimes discuss how *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>* may discourage investigation of conspiracies. But this is almost always a specific instance of the particularist’s much broader and primary concern regarding what they take to be a key function of this concept, namely, that *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>* serves to stigmatize and marginalize views that challenge dominant institutions, figures, and beliefs, regardless of whether such views posit a conspiracy.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Much more needs to be said here, and in my forthcoming, I defend this view of inquiry, truth, and normativity in-depth, drawing in particular on elements of the pragmatist tradition. Thank you to Nick Smyth, M Dentith, Julia Duetz, Rico Hauswald, and attendees at the University of Pittsburgh Words Workshop for helpful discussion of these points.

<sup>9</sup> The account is therefore complementary with Haslanger’s and the conceptual engineering literature more broadly. It aims to broaden our understanding of what we are doing as speakers when we engage in conceptual articulation.

<sup>10</sup> Napolitano and Reuter consistently use this formulation – that particularists take the function of *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>* to be discouraging the investigation of conspiracies. For example: the particularists claim that ‘the evaluative *conspiracy theory* serves the function of silencing warranted accusations of conspiring’ (2021, 2); against the particularists, ‘the function that this concept serves in academic practices and discourses cannot be silencing warranted conspiracy accusations’ (2021, 22).

<sup>11</sup> The language of ‘function’ is Napolitano and Reuter’s. They do not, however, tell us what their view of functions is. I follow their usage here to avoid further complicating the discussion. It is worth noting, however, that any claims regarding ‘the’ function of a concept, particularly when attempting to track ordinary usage, are likely to be misguided. There will be a plurality of functions at play in ordinary contexts, as there are for any natural language expression, and the salience of these different functions will depend on the relevant context and our interpretive interests (Jaszczolt 2016; Cappelen 2018). Particularists do not themselves often use this function-based language; Husting and Orr, for example, refer to the ‘pejorative’ nature of *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>* (2007; Orr and Husting 2019). To signal this difference in particularist views, I typically use ‘a key function’ (rather than Napolitano and Reuter’s ‘the’ function) to refer to the particularist view that *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>* serves to stigmatize and marginalize the views of those outside of the relevant dominant institutions. Thank you to M Dentith and Rico Hauswald for discussion here.

This is not merely an idle interpretive point. While we should of course aim to give accurate characterizations of the philosophical views with which we engage, there are two further pressing reasons this clarification is important. First, what particularists say about the function of *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>* is more plausible than the position Napolitano and Reuter attribute to them. Rather than the more speculative and tenuous claim that the function of *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>* is specifically to discourage investigation of conspiracies, the claim that a key function of this concept is to stigmatize and further marginalize the views of those outside of dominant institutions is well supported by examining the use of this concept, especially among figures with formal institutional authority.<sup>12</sup> For example, Husting and Orr carry out two analyses of articles from *The New York Times* (the first ranging from 2000-2005, the second from 2005-2013), leading to their conclusion that ‘the phrase is a mechanism of exclusion that symbolically banishes questions, claims, and concerns so labeled from the public sphere as unwarranted – or worse’ (2007, 133); it is ‘used to dismiss scholars, journalists, and citizens who question, or worse yet document, the consolidation or abuse of political, economic, and cultural resources’ (Orr and Husting 2019, 82). Second, if particularists (correctly understood) are right about this function, then this poses significant problems for Napolitano and Reuter’s attempted engineering project – the topic of section 4. Here, then, are representative particularist discussions of *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>* and one of the key functions it serves:

1.) From Husting and Orr:

‘If I call you a ‘conspiracy theorist,’ it matters little whether you have actually claimed that a conspiracy exists or whether you have simply raised an issue that I would rather avoid. As part of the machinery of interaction, the label does conversational work no matter how true, false, or conspiracy-related your utterance is. Using the phrase, I can symbolically exclude you from the imagined community of reasonable interlocutors. Specifically, when I call you a ‘conspiracy theorist,’ I can turn the tables on you: instead of responding to a question, concern, or challenge, I twist the machinery of interaction so that you, not I, are now called to account. In fact, I have done even more. By labeling you, I strategically exclude you from the sphere where public speech, debate, and conflict occur’ (2007, 127).

The key function of *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>* that Husting and Orr highlight here is therefore not to discourage “people from investigating conspiracies”, as Napolitano and Reuter claim. This could not be their view since Husting and Orr stress here that individuals are categorized as *conspiracy theorists<sub>e</sub>* regardless of how ‘conspiracy-related your utterance is’. They would therefore agree with Napolitano and Reuter’s view that within reigning usage, one does not need to posit a conspiracy to have one’s view labeled a ‘conspiracy theory’ or to be labeled a ‘conspiracy theorist’. But this is also why Napolitano and Reuter’s characterization of how particularists think about the function of *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>*—discouraging investigation of

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<sup>12</sup> A closer reading of particularist formulations reveals that those who worry that *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>* will discourage investigations of conspiracies take this to be a possible *effect* of the use of *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>*, not the function of the concept. Here, for example, is Basham and Dentith on this point: ‘After all, in an environment in which people take a dim view of conspiracy theories, conspiracies may multiply and prosper’ (2016, 13). But effects of the use of the term and its function (or functions) are distinct. When the bailiff says that court is in session, this may generally have the effect of generating a heightened sense of anticipation in the courtroom, but that is not the function of the utterance (i.e., to formally announce the beginning of court proceedings). Independent of the effect of *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>* on potentially discouraging investigations of conspiracies, particularists take the pejorative function of this concept to be broader – a stigmatizing and dismissal of views that challenge dominant institutions, figures, and beliefs, as the passages (1)-(3) cited in this section show.

conspiracies—cannot be right. For Husting and Orr, as for other particularists, a key function of *conspiracy theory*<sub>e</sub> is to stigmatize and marginalize voices that are outside of the relevant dominant institutions regardless of whether they posit conspiracies.

2.) Initially, Coady might seem to be a particularist who reflects Napolitano and Reuter's reading: *conspiracy theory*<sub>e</sub> 'makes it less likely that such conspiracies will be exposed (or exposed in a timely manner), and more likely that the perpetrators of conspiracies will get away with them' (2018a, 182). But in the very next paragraph and referencing his previous work, Coady explains the precise nature of his view:

'In fact the term conspiracy theorist has evolved to the point where it is little more than a label for people who believe, or are interested in investigating, any proposition which conflicts with an officially sanctioned or orthodox belief. Indeed, the expression is sometimes used of such people, even when their so-called conspiracy theory does not involve a conspiracy at all (e.g., David Coady (2006d, 125)). The expressions "conspiracy theory" and "conspiracy theorist" are the respectable modern equivalents of "heresy" and "heretic" respectively; these expressions serve to castigate and marginalize anyone who rejects or even questions orthodox or officially endorsed beliefs' (2018, 183).

Like Husting and Orr, Coady similarly claims that *conspiracy theory*<sub>e</sub> is deployed against those who do not posit conspiracies. The function of the concept, then, is not primarily to discourage investigation of conspiracies; the relevant key function of the concept is 'to castigate and marginalize anyone who rejects or even questions orthodox or officially endorsed beliefs', regardless of whether the individual posits a conspiracy.

3.) A final example from Basham:

'The goal of pathologizing projects is to disqualify a class of citizens from public discourse, silence them, ideally, eliminate them in one manner or another: in one way or another, to disappear them from the dominant discourse of the times. It is a method of dealing with *dissident citizens*. The formula is simple: pathologize, disqualify, silence, disappear. These are historically applied to any group deemed sufficiently efficacious in society and excessively contrary to certain political and ideological tenets' (2018, 96).

Again, particularists are clear and emphatic on what they take to be a primary function of *conspiracy theory*<sub>e</sub>: it is an effective tool for stigmatizing and marginalizing views that are outside of or challenge those advocated by dominant institutions and figures.

Now if particularists are right that careful examination of the usage of *conspiracy theory*<sub>e</sub> reveals that this concept is regularly invoked and articulated by speakers in order to serve a political agenda that these speakers are aiming to protect rather than interrogate (even if they are doing so unwittingly), then we have good reason to think that *conspiracy theory*<sub>e</sub> is often a site of conceptual domination: it is a concept deployed by speakers with various forms of institutional authority in order to advance their non-inquiry interests. These are speakers who the evidence strongly suggests have little or no investment in or commitment to inquiry regarding this concept (whatever their avowed intentions might be), but who instead want to impose a view of this concept in order to

advance certain interests regardless of how genuine inquirers would argue or conclude we should make sense of this concept.

It is worth clarifying two different dimensions that are at play in this case of conceptual domination. In many cases, the concept is deployed to stigmatize and silence genuine dissidents. Noam Chomsky, for example, describes this treatment of his and similar dissident views regarding US foreign policy:

‘If you’re in a faculty club or an editorial office...there’s a collection of phrases that can be used which are the intellectual equivalent of four-letter words and tantrums. One of them is ‘conspiracy theory’...[part of] a series of totally meaningless curse words, in effect, which are used by people who...want to shut you up’” (2004; cited in Husting and Orr 2007, 145).<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the stigmatizing and silencing of genuine dissident views, a different aspect of this form of conceptual domination is apparent in how *conspiracy theory*<sub>e</sub> is deployed against individuals who may well have egregiously flawed beliefs, but who are specifically singled out for censure because they are outside of the relevant dominant institutional contexts. This feature becomes especially apparent on a close reading of the academic work that invokes this concept.

Now it is important to recall that, on my account, conceptual domination does not depend on intent. Researchers therefore need not be aware of what they are doing to count as such. We are best off consulting the sources of evidence I listed in section 1 and carefully examining the details of the relevant case in order to make any determinations. Such judgments are often difficult, as I emphasize in my original discussion and here. Some cases are more clear-cut (such as the Goertzel piece cited in footnote 13), others less so in no small part because conceptual domination is typically a ‘temporally extended process...[that] can be difficult to read off isolated...exchanges’ (Shields 2021a, 15063). But the question of whether or not individual researchers are best characterized as engaging in conceptual domination is less important here than the larger process and context of conceptual domination that I believe particularists have identified and to which a great deal of this academic research ends up either directly or indirectly contributing.

Consider, for example, Sunstein and Vermeule’s framing of their discussion:

‘Throughout, we assume a well-motivated government...although real-world governments can themselves be purveyors of conspiracy theories, as when the Bush administration suggested that Saddam Hussein had conspired with Al Qaeda to support the 9/11 attacks’ (2009, 219).

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<sup>13</sup> One finds an example of this move regarding Chomsky specifically in Ted Goertzel’s 2019 that describes Chomsky and his frequent co-author Edward Herman as conspiracy theorists in the same category as archetypal frauds like Andrew Wakefield. Goertzel does not engage with the many thousands of pages of Chomsky and Herman’s empirically and historically-informed research, nor any of the subsequent scholarship evaluating their work (Herman and Chomsky 1979a; 1979b; and 1988/2008; see Mullen and Klaehn 2010 for an overview). Instead, Goertzel refers to quotes posted to random websites, falsely claims that Chomsky ‘does not submit his work on foreign policy to judgment by his professional peers’, floats the accusation that Chomsky is a ‘self-hating Jew’, and cites a paper by Jeffery Klaehn to try and support his claim that media scholars do not take the Herman-Chomsky propaganda model seriously (2019, 233 and 237). However, the cited Klaehn paper not only argues that the failure to engage with the Herman-Chomsky model is a grave scholarly error (given that the model is ‘forceful and convincing’), but also that attempts to dismiss their model by categorizing it as ‘conspiracy theory’ amounts to ‘*precisely that, a label*, one that has been used as a means of dismissing PM [the Herman-Chomsky propaganda model] without granting a minimal presentation of the model or a consideration of evidence’ (Klaehn 2002, 173 and 148-9). Goertzel’s piece, then, is an attempt to impose a concept (*conspiracy theorist*<sub>e</sub>) via markedly deficient practices of inquiry in the service of certain political views that are not themselves critically reflected on or defended – i.e., a case of conceptual domination.

They claim without citation that this is a ‘standard assumption in policy analysis’, but they do not give any explanation or defense of this assumption (2009, 219). They also explain that they are concerned about conspiracy theories because of the harms they cause. Yet their ‘running example involves conspiracy theories relating to...the 9/11 attacks’, i.e., 9/11 as “inside job” claims (2009, 204). No explanation or argument is given, however, concerning the harms of these claims. By contrast, the harms of the Bush administration’s attempts to fabricate a link between Iraq and Al Qaeda—attempts that were successful for much of the US public—could not be more stark. This fabricated link served as one of the crucial justifications for the US invasion of Iraq, and the invasion killed, at least, hundreds of thousands of civilians and produced millions of refugees, among other devastating economic and political consequences for Iraq and the region (Crawford and Lutz 2019; Vine et al. 2021). If conspiracy theories are worrying because of the harms they cause, surely such examples should play a central role in any analysis, rather than be marginalized without argument.<sup>14</sup> Yet such moves are pervasive in the academic literature.<sup>15</sup>

Part of the conceptual domination involving *conspiracy theory*, then, is that it works to uniquely stigmatize those outside of the relevant dominant institutional contexts and shield those same contexts from criticism. Such individuals may be genuine dissidents or they may well have egregiously mistaken or false beliefs, but are nonetheless singled out for censure because they are not part of the relevant dominant institutional context. The social scientific and psychological literature enacts this same move. In a recent literature overview, Douglas et al. explain that when measuring ‘belief in conspiracy theories, scholars and polling houses often ask respondents—through surveys—if they believe in particular conspiracy theories such as 9/11, the assassination of JFK, or the death of Princess Diana’ (Douglas et al. 2019, 5). Conspiracy theories fabricated by dominant institutions with the same, or worse, epistemic flaws and with far more devastating implications are typically absent in these surveys, as is specific testing of those who belong to such institutions.

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<sup>14</sup> Rico Hauswald asks whether I would categorize Sunstein & Vermeule specifically as engaging in conceptual domination. Again, judgments about individual cases can be difficult, but Sunstein & Vermeule have failed to engage with critiques of their piece and engaged in ‘repeating the same claim as if the refutation had never happened’ (Anderson 2011, 148). See, for example, Sunstein’s 2016 and 2020. Elizabeth Anderson calls this a form of “dialogic irrationality” (2011, 148), and it gives us reason to think they might be best viewed as engaging in a form of conceptual domination here, especially given Sunstein’s positions of formal authority, as discussed in Coady’s 2018b. Nothing in my argument, however, hangs on how we judge this particular case. With respect to Napolitano & Reuter, especially given the early stages of their project and as I emphasize throughout, my point is that they are indeed engaged in conceptual engineering (and not conceptual domination) but that they are ignoring the broader context of conceptual domination that surrounds their target concept. My more general claim in this paper is that such projects (where philosophers engage in engineering while ignoring a broader context of conceptual domination) can be a toxic brew, one that philosophers should be scrupulous to guard against. In my 2021a (15051-2), I briefly consider a simplified version of a Napolitano & Reuter-esque view in the context of Marques’ 2020. What I would add to that toy example is just that ‘meaning perversions’ in Marques’s sense can contribute to broader contexts of conceptual domination. It is the latter type of case—conceptual engineering projects that fail to reckon with a larger context of conceptual domination—that the current paper is concerned with.

<sup>15</sup> Quassim Cassam, for example, cites the Bush administration’s Iraq-Al Qaeda fabricated connection in the first chapter of his book but never substantively returns to it. He then argues at length that one of the defining features of *conspiracy theorists*, is that they have ‘the qualifications of the amateur sleuths’ and are best thought of as ‘Internet detectives’ (2019, 23-4). But this claim is directly contradicted by Cassam’s opening example: the members of the Bush administration were credentialed by and continue to participate in our most prestigious educational institutions, and they work as prominent members of our class of foreign policy experts. But this case does not factor into his subsequent analysis. I discuss these aspects of Cassam’s account in more detail in my 2022.

Now Napolitano and Reuter might argue that even if the particularists are right that the concept *conspiracy theory*, serves a stigmatizing function when used by actors with formal authority, their own studies show that the:

[E]valuative concept *conspiracy theory* [that] is prevalent in ordinary thought and language, and attributions of ‘conspiracy theory’ seem to be driven by an assessment of the target theory... Thus, the function that this concept serves in academic practices and discourses cannot be silencing warranted conspiracy accusations’ (2021, 22).

I have already explained that particularists do not claim that the function of the concept of *conspiracy theory* is ‘silencing warranted conspiracy accusations’. But we can revise the point: ordinary speakers do not appear to have any intention to stigmatize certain views or serve any sort of political agenda; they are just ‘driven by an assessment of the target theory’. Since Napolitano and Reuter want their engineered concept to be continuous with this ordinary usage, it could therefore not be the case that their engineered concept functions in this way either.<sup>16</sup>

There are various problems with this line of thought. First, we should not expect ordinary speakers who are not invested to the same degree as or have the requisite skills and knowledge as researchers in making explicit the structure of the concepts and meanings they use to be aware of this structure. We should not expect this for any concept or meaning, and we should certainly not expect it for concepts and meanings that many philosophers and researchers think are forms of more subtle political propaganda. Summing up recent work in social and political philosophy of language, Jenny Saul explains that ‘making sense of politically manipulative speech will require a detailed engagement with certain forms of speech that function in a less conscious manner’ (2018, 361). Dogwhistles, figleaves, code words, and propaganda often work precisely by *not* showing up to speakers as such. Here is Saul on the case of ‘covert dogwhistles’:

‘Such an utterance would appear on its face to be innocuous and unrelated to race – lending deniability if confronted with racism accusations. And, if the dogwhistled content could do its work outside the dogwhistle-audience’s awareness, it would not be rejected in the way that an explicitly racist dogwhistle would be’ (2018, 365).

For example, ‘inner city’ has come to function as a dogwhistle for *black*. Thus, politicians who would be rebuked if they called for harsher measures against black criminals can safely call for ‘cracking down on inner city crime’, and the audience need not be aware of this effect, even when they then adopt this usage (2018, 366). Jason Stanley takes a similar line with respect to propaganda: ‘[T]he distinctive danger propaganda poses in liberal democracies is that it is *not recognized as propaganda*’ (2015, 47). For example, ‘[w]hen the news media connects images of urban Blacks repeatedly with mentions of the term ‘welfare,’ the term ‘welfare’ comes to have the not-at-issue content that Blacks are lazy. At some point, the repeated associations are part of the meaning, the not-at-issue content’ (2018, 138). By its very nature, such not-at-issue content regularly escapes the notice of many users of and audiences for the term.<sup>17</sup> We therefore cannot infer from the fact that

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<sup>16</sup> Keeley, in this issue, looks at a related issue concerning the how the lay concept of the term ‘conspiracy theory’ should map onto the academic work (forthcoming).

<sup>17</sup> Such tactics, however, *can* be the product of conscious strategy on the part of speakers in many cases. My point, however, is that they need not be and often are not when picked up and then used by wider audiences. Thanks to Rico Hauswald for discussion of this point.

ordinary speakers are not aware of or do not explicitly invoke various political dimensions of a relevant term or concept that these dimensions are not at play.

Second, Napolitano and Reuter's direction of explanation here seems misguided. On standard philosophical accounts of the linguistic division of labor, the terms and concepts used by ordinary speakers will in part inherit their meaning from their relationship to speakers who have various forms of distinct epistemic or linguistic authority over the terms and concepts in question (Putnam 1986; Burge 1979). If, to take the standard Burge example, I believe I have arthritis in my thigh, it does not follow that I have my own *sui generis* concept *arthritis<sub>mat</sub>* and that my belief is therefore not contradicted by the doctor's claim that this is not and could not be the case (Burge 1979). Rather, I have made a mistake, and this is in part because the meaning of 'arthritis' or *arthritis* is not up to me; it is something I inherit from my broader linguistic and epistemic community, where other inquirers and speakers have distinct skills, knowledge, and authority that help reveal the meaning of my terms and concepts that I may be entirely aware of or mistaken about. Many argue that this division of labor is a necessary feature of our epistemic and linguistic lives; it also often works to our enormous benefit. It is, for example, what allows us collectively to correct our false beliefs in light of further evidence, even when those false beliefs were once crucial to how we previously made sense of the topic in question. On more traditional views of meaning, change in these beliefs would entail a change in meaning, rendering discoveries not discoveries at all, but mere changes in topic.

This division of linguistic labor, however, can also have a darker side. Derek Ball has recently made this point: 'If experts have the power to determine what our words mean, they can do so responsibly or irresponsibly, from good motivations or bad, justly or unjustly, with good or bad effects. In short, they can exercise this power rightly or wrongly' (2020, 207). He continues: 'It is plausible that meaning can be manipulated – through propaganda, coercion, and subtle bias', including by the relevant experts or figures with institutional authority (2020, 211). I do not have space here to explore Ball's and kindred arguments in-depth, but once we accept a privileged role for figures with various forms of institutional authority in determining the meaning of certain of our terms and concepts, then we should not start from the assumption that ordinary language is simply a self-contained unit untainted by this activity. If anything, our direction of explanation should be reversed, especially in cases of charged political terminology: we should begin with those speakers whose formal and informal institutional authority gives them a privileged role in shaping linguistic meaning for the rest of us. This is, in fact, what the particularists do: they start by analyzing the usage of speakers vested with this authority and certain key functions served by their linguistic activity.

Third and most importantly, Napolitano and Reuter's claim that because speakers take themselves to be 'driven by an assessment of the target theory', other functions, such as the one particularists emphasize, cannot be operative in their linguistic activity seems to assume that intent is necessary for a function to be operative. But this assumption is mistaken. To see this, consider the case of slurs. While there is enormous disagreement about the nature of slurs in the philosophical literature, there is very broad agreement that nefarious intentions or occurrent beliefs regarding the function of such terms are not needed for them to serve their characteristic functions – for example, of derogating or subordinating outgroups and solidifying ingroups. Summing up this consensus, Renée Bolinger writes, 'slurs are offensive even when the speaker does not intend the use to be derogatory' (2017, 439). Quill Kukla (writing as Rebecca Kukla): the 'function of slurs' is served 'whether or not anyone involved intends for the slur to work that way or has any particular feelings or conscious thoughts associated with using or being targeted by the slur' (2018, 7). Lynne Tirrell:

‘Derogations may be received without much notice, and still do the job of realigning the target’s place in the world. Again we see that intention alone cannot carry all this weight’ (2012, 196).<sup>18</sup>

This consensus is well-motivated. Consider a similar example: if I hang a Nazi flag outside of my house or make a Nazi salute, it does not matter what my intent is. These symbols function in distinctive ways regardless of my intent and even if I am entirely ignorant of or mistaken about the history of these symbols. Napolitano and Reuter’s position—that ordinary speakers’ usage of *conspiracy theory*<sub>e</sub> cannot serve a stigmatizing, political function because it does not show up to them as such—is therefore misguided.

But they may nonetheless push back here: it is all well and good to claim from the armchair that ordinary speakers inherit this stigmatizing function in their usage, but why think this is actually the case? For example, when an ordinary speaker refers to the claim that the moon landing-was-faked as a ‘conspiracy theory’, in what sense is this function in play?

Recall my elaborations of the particularist account in this section. Whether they realize or not, when ordinary speakers treat cases such as flat earthers, proponents of Sandy Hook as false flag, 9/11 as inside job, moon landing as faked, or JFK assassination claims as apt for categorization as instances of *conspiracy theory*<sub>e</sub>, as in fact paradigmatic instances of *conspiracy theory*<sub>e</sub>, this stigmatizing function is indeed in play. Here, ordinary speakers follow the practice of formally authoritative speakers: we are singling out cases of individuals outside of dominant institutions for special censure, even when the relevant epistemic flaws apply at least as directly and arguably much more urgently to views fabricated and endorsed by those within dominant institutions. We saw direct examples of this phenomenon in Sunstein and Vermuele’s work as well as the social scientific and psychological literature.

It is therefore not surprising that we find it less natural or even infelicitous to categorize the Bush Administration’s attempts to link Iraq and Al Qaeda as an instance of *conspiracy theory*<sub>e</sub>. But this feature of ordinary language is not simply a neutral datum that we should use to inform serious theoretical work; it should prompt us to think critically about why this concept works in this strikingly inconsistent and politically suspect way. The particularist account of a key function of *conspiracy theory*<sub>e</sub> provides us with an explanation. Our ordinary usage seems to be a direct reflection of the practices of formally authoritative speakers: a concept has gained substantial currency among political actors, academic researchers, and prominent media institutions that discredits individuals outside of the relevant dominant institutional contexts, in turn reinforcing the legitimacy of those dominant contexts by suggesting that they are exempt from such flaws.<sup>19</sup>

If the reading of the particularists I have given in this section is right, then this group of philosophers can be helpfully read as diagnosing and aiming to defend against a form of conceptual domination, as I have explained the latter notion. In turn, it would seem that particularists are not primarily, or perhaps even at all, in the business of conceptual engineering. Their position is that we

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<sup>18</sup> Pigden, in this issue, also compares the way in which the common usage of ‘conspiracy theory’ resembles a slur (forthcoming).

<sup>19</sup> Napolitano and Reuter’s Study 2b suggests that the ‘officialness’ of a story may not prevent it from counting as a conspiracy theory (in the negatively evaluative sense) for ordinary speakers (2021, 16). But by ‘officialness’ here, they mean ‘whether or not the wide majority of’ the relevant community ‘believed the claim to be true’ (2021, 23). But this does not tell us how speakers evaluate such stories when specifically fabricated by those within dominant institutional contexts. More generally, future helpful empirical work in this area could explore what examples of conspiracy theories (in the negatively evaluative sense) first and primarily come to mind for ordinary speakers and who they first and primarily take to be examples of conspiracy theorists in this sense. Our own usage (e.g., the less natural categorization of the Bush administration’s fabricated Al Qaeda-Iraq link as a conspiracy theory) and the consistent marginalization of conspiracy theories with the same epistemic flaws fabricated by dominant institutions by speakers with forms of institutional authority already give us good evidence that those outside the relevant dominant institutional contexts are disproportionately targeted by this concept. See my 2022 for further discussion.

stop using the negatively evaluative concept of conspiracy theory – stop using *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>*. Coady is perhaps most explicit about this move: ‘I am committed to the normative, indeed the ethical thesis, that we should refrain from using ‘conspiracy theory’ in the negatively evaluative sense ‘and should discourage others from doing so as well’ (2018b, 292). But this push for abandonment is in fact the upshot of all particularist positions. Consider Basham and Dentith: ‘Any pejorative use of ‘conspiracy theory’ is intellectually suspect’ (2016, 15). Or Pigden: ‘Some conspiracy theories are sensible and some are silly, but if they are silly this is not because they are conspiracy theories’ (Pigden 2007, 219). There is, in other words, no reason either to retain or add the negatively evaluative concept *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>* to our epistemic and political vocabularies, which have the linguistic and conceptual resources we require for criticizing false and unjustified beliefs, including those that are egregiously so. Furthermore, there is excellent reason to resist the continued use or articulation of this concept: examination of the usage and articulation of *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>* reveals that it is a tool for stigmatizing and further marginalizing those already outside of the relevant halls of power and in turn treating the halls themselves as avatars of rationality.

Now, it should be acknowledged that the particularist push to abandon *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>* does require clarifying that they intend to use the term ‘conspiracy theory’ in a way that speakers will likely be less familiar with – i.e., clarifying that they will use the term to mean *a theory that posits a conspiracy* rather than *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>*. Perhaps we will want to say that this move is a project in conceptual engineering. But such a characterization strikes me as misleading. The goal here is not to engineer a novel concept to add to our existing epistemic and political vocabularies; it is to block the imposition and extant usage of a defective and pernicious concept, to protect against conceptual domination. We can of course call this project of conceptual abandonment or blocking a type of ‘conceptual engineering’ if we so wish. I do not want to haggle over labels. My point is that the relevant philosophical moves are crucially different: arguing that we should add a concept to our vocabularies is different than arguing that we should not add a defective concept to our vocabularies or should excise it (especially when we already have the conceptual resources we need for the relevant domain). The latter project will focus on diagnosing the source and nature of the defectiveness (including whether it is regularly imposed on others by authoritative speakers), advocate for blocking or excision, and perhaps point to existing conceptual resources as sufficient – a project particularists undertake for *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>* on my reading.<sup>20</sup> I discuss this point in more detail in section 4, but turn first to an objection.

### 3. *A Response to Conspiracy Theory<sub>e</sub> as a Site of Conceptual Domination*

Suppose Napolitano and Reuter concede that the political stigma function *is* present in ordinary thought and talk surrounding *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>*. They may nonetheless argue that this function is irrelevant because, as they put it at one point, ‘the evaluative component of *conspiracy theory* is a feature of the meaning of the expression, rather than a pragmatic implication of its use’ (2021, 22, fn 19). In other words, ‘function’ is a matter of pragmatics—a matter of how an expression or concept is used—and therefore non-essential to its meaning or its semantics. And because these two dimensions of language are separable—use/pragmatics on the one hand and meaning/semantics on the other—we can simply carry out our engineering project on the meaning/semantics of the term or concept and leave any pragmatic baggage behind.

This approach, however, relies on a largely discredited strict separation of pragmatics and semantics. The question of ‘boundary disputes’ concerning where the distinct domains of semantics

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<sup>20</sup> For more discussion of the relationship between conceptual engineering and conceptual abandonment, see Cappelen (ms).

and pragmatics lie, if anywhere, has been one of the main sources of debate among philosophers of language and linguists for several decades. Most philosophers working in this area accept that the context of use fundamentally alters the semantics of at least *some* natural language expressions. The debate is largely about exactly how far this intrusion goes: Cappelen and Lepore, for example, argue that this necessary intertwining of semantics and pragmatics holds just for a special subset of natural language expressions, such as indexicals and demonstratives (Cappelen and Lepore 2005); Recanati argues that all truth conditions depend on forms of pragmatic enrichment (Recanati 2012); Travis's occasion-sensitivity goes further still (Travis 2008). Note that the debate here is not over whether pragmatics *can* fundamentally alter semantics. Again, this point is accepted by the vast majority of researchers in this area. The question is about where and how often this occurs. Surveying this now multi-decade debate, Kasia Jaszczolt writes:

‘The onus of proof seems to lie with those who, like the ‘fixers’, try to impose the privileged status on one of the aspects of meaning or one of the sources of information’ (2016, 48).

For Jaszczolt, the appropriate move is simply to do away with the unproductive myth of a pure semantic ‘backbone’ untainted by pragmatic and other information (2016, 24). We should allow that ‘the lexicon, grammar, recognition of intentions, recognition of goals and situation types, social and cultural conventions, general (including scientific) knowledge, and other sources of contributing information are all equally important in communication and thus are equally important for representing meaning in communication’ (2016, 48). But even if we do not end up endorsing Jaszczolt’s specific program, it is clear that Napolitano and Reuter cannot simply invoke an unproblematic strict meaning/use or semantics/pragmatics divide to circumscribe what they want to engineer. The function of *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>* that particularists emphasize may well be just as essential to its semantics as anything else.

#### **4. Why Getting this Metaphilosophy Right Matters**

At this point, Napolitano and Reuter might concede that the concept *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>* they want to engineer has been and remains a site of conceptual domination, and that they cannot rely on the intentions of ordinary speakers or the strict independence of semantics from pragmatics to wave away the question of how and why this concept is deployed. But they may reply as follows: the fact that a concept has been, or is a site of conceptual domination, does not mean it has to be, nor does it mean it cannot be engineered into something theoretically respectable. Furthermore, it is the very act of conceptual engineering *itself* that grants us the linguistic and conceptual autonomy to articulate novel concepts and meanings. And given this linguistic and conceptual autonomy to preserve and forge what we want in a concept or meaning and jettison what we do not, we need not worry about any historical or political baggage linked to the original concept.

This is a tempting line of thought. I have myself argued that there is something crucially right in it (Shields 2020 and 2021b). But it is only the beginning of the story for the prospective conceptual engineer. Those who invoke it incur at least two crucial debts: first, they must show that their own engineered concept manages to extricate itself from this context of conceptual domination and certainly does not further contribute to it; second, they must show that there are various weighty theoretical and/or practical advantages for their engineered concept, advantages that clearly outweigh the harms of continuing to invoke a concept with a history of serving as a site of conceptual domination. In this section, I will show that we have good reason to be skeptical that Napolitano and Reuter’s engineering project and any such project regarding *conspiracy theory<sub>e</sub>* will be successful on these fronts. I will also argue that we discern here a more general metaphilosophical

lesson for the kind of caution that should be exercised for conceptual engineering projects, especially in social and political contexts.

To begin, various counterexamples demonstrate why a metaphilosophical story that stops at the claim that conceptual engineering equips us with the conceptual and linguistic autonomy to dispense with any unwanted baggage associated with a term or concept are lacking. Consider, for example, the concept *military-age male*, central to US drone policy, especially under the Obama administration. The concept ‘counts all military-age males in a strike zone as combatants...unless there is explicit intelligence posthumously proving them innocent’ (Becker and Shane 2012; Shoker 2021). The use of the concept allows the US to claim that its drone program has resulted in few, and in some years even no, civilian casualties. Such numbers are fabrications, but they are licensed by use of the concept *military-age male* that allows officials to recategorize civilians as combatants (Shoker 2021). This is not a concept that has been articulated by those invested in and committed to arriving at the best or correct view from the perspective of genuine inquirers; this concept has been generated and imposed in order to produce advantageous political outcomes for specific actors and institutions – outcomes that are not themselves subject to open, critical scrutiny.

Now suppose a philosopher claims that they want to engineer *military-age male*. While they are aware and make gestures towards the history and surrounding context of this concept, they claim that the very act of conceptual engineering means they are not bound and therefore need not worry about this history or context. I submit that we would not—and should not—accept this line of thought. Any such engineering project would have to reckon in-depth with this history and context and show precisely how their project manages to extricate itself from the latter and why exactly the project is so valuable. Furthermore, we would likely worry that this project risks further contributing to the broader process of conceptual domination that originally produced this concept.

If this example is not compelling, consider others. Should we, for example, engineer the concept *welfare queen*? Or the concepts *manifest destiny* or *great replacement*? Again, it seems that any project involving these concepts would rightly be met with enormous skepticism, and we would expect anyone carrying out such a project to engage scrupulously with the relevant history and context surrounding these concepts. We would not accept the claim that the linguistic and conceptual autonomy afforded by conceptual engineering means that they can largely, or even entirely, ignore this history and context. It seems far more likely that we would say what is intellectually called for is the exposure of these concepts and their uses as instances of conceptual domination. We would want to study and document, for example, through historical and sociological research, how and why such a concept came to be generated and then imposed. We would then relegate these concepts exclusively to mention and quotation, rather than any type of use. We would, in other words, view these concepts as best off abandoned – not engineered into theoretical respectability. At the very least, we would advise anyone considering an engineering project for these concepts to exercise *extreme* caution and to do everything in their power to account for the relevant historical and political context before jumping into an engineering project.

In response, Napolitano and Reuter might say: but there would be no utility, only harm, to engineering the concepts I cite here. That is why we should not engineer them. But the same is not true of *conspiracy theory*.

There is, however, already extensive documentation from particularists regarding the relevant function and resulting harms of the continued circulation of *conspiracy theory*. Napolitano and Reuter briefly acknowledge that ‘the academic and political uses of the expression have been more thoroughly documented’, but, as we have seen, they have not engaged with this documentation in-depth and, as a result, have misconstrued the harms the particularists claim stem from continued use of this concept (2021, 8). It is therefore unclear how and whether their project will manage to free itself from this broader context of conceptual domination.

Furthermore, much more would need to be said about the precise utility to engineering *conspiracy theory*, to determine whether the project is ultimately worthwhile and outweighs any potential harms. We are told that this engineering project is worth pursuing because this concept represents ‘a phenomenon which has attracted the interest of many scholars and institutions’ (2021, 22). But we should not just uncritically endorse this interest concerning a concept that has this kind of history and surrounding context. Many topics—from phrenology to ‘the Orient’ to conversion therapy, to take particularly stark examples—attract the interest of scholars and institutions whose subsequent work turns out to do great harm.

Napolitano and Reuter also suggest that their engineering project ‘would enable those approaches that look at the non-epistemic reasons for believing conspiracy theories – such as psychological or sociological reasons’ to have a better theoretical foundation (2021, 23). But we have already seen that the extant empirical literature may in many cases be complicit in the process of conceptual domination.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps there is another form of or direction for empirical approach Napolitano and Reuter have in mind. If so, it would have to be spelled out, and, again, it would have to be shown how such future research directions would extricate themselves from this history and ongoing process of conceptual domination. The fact that social scientific and psychological research might have to be revised, even radically, in order to ensure that it does not invoke defective concepts that do and perpetuate serious harm is certainly not without precedent, as cases such as the history of the empirical study of gender, race, and LGBTQIA+ identities demonstrate.

To conclude, I cannot rule out *a priori*—and would not want to—that there might be an engineering project worth pursuing involving *conspiracy theory*, as indeed there might in principle be a worthwhile engineering project for any concept. Similarly, there might in principle be a worthwhile reclamation project for any slur, a point Tirrell makes: ‘Unfortunately, the social norms and practices that generate the...commitments of these terms are so prevalent across all our sub-communities that variations in contextual features have had little success in overturning the derogation. That does not prove that the reclamation project is doomed; it just suggests that it is not easy’ (1999, 64). By extension, any attempt to engineer concepts that are steeped in forms of conceptual domination will have to contend in-depth with the relevant history and political context of the target concept and show precisely how they liberate themselves from this context and why such an effort is worthwhile. Conceptual engineering projects regarding race and gender, for example, come closer to meeting these desiderata, citing and engaging with the relevant history and context and demonstrating why such projects would be valuable and outweigh possible harms (e.g., Haslanger 2012; Dembroff 2020). But it is not clear to me that Napolitano and Reuter’s view meets these bars, nor what a conceptual engineering project regarding *conspiracy theory* looks like that could.

Our ability to conceptually engineer may well be a reflection of our striking capacity for linguistic and conceptual freedom. But freedom, even if it is conceptual freedom, also entails a corresponding responsibility – a responsibility with which all inquirers must reckon.

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<sup>21</sup> Dentith, in this issue, questions why Napolitano and Reuter think the philosophical work should be subservient to the work in the social sciences (forthcoming).

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