Which Method(s) for Conceptual Engineering?*

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1. The symposium

'Conceptual engineering' is chief among the most popular labels at the cutting edge of philosophical research. The phrase was independently coined in Carnap scholarship (Creath 1991; Carus 2007; Wagner 2012) and in metaphilosophy (Blackburn 1999; Brandom 2001; Floridi 2011). Since then, these two trends have connected (Brun 2016), and further expanded on the side of social philosophy (Haslanger 2012). In less than a decade, the movement has spanned across philosophy to become a proper field of its own whose attraction is still growing with an explosive intensity.[1] The basic idea behind it is that sometimes our conceptual apparatuses need to be ameliorated in the attainment of some beneficial consequences. Accordingly, conceptual engineers are guided by a normative agenda: they aim to prescribe the concepts we *ought to* have and use, rather than merely describing those we *do* have and use. To this end, one of their main purposes is to develop a methodological framework for assessing and improving our conceptual devices — that is, in particular, for identifying deficiencies in our conceptual apparatuses and for fixing them (Cappelen 2018).

Despite its centrality to research in conceptual engineering, little had been said about how we could develop its methodological framework. The rationale for the MET4CE symposium was to initiate the first forays into this topic. Against this background, the symposium intended to focus on two core issues: first, can we devise the method of conceptual engineering as a staged and parametrized process, that is, as a set of step-by-step guidelines for ameliorating our conceptual devices supplemented by a set of adjustable parameters for measuring their functional efficacy? The common framework to tackle this issue was Carnapian explication, procedurally reconstructed, and complemented by other compatible frameworks and methods (e.g., reflective equilibrium, levels of abstraction, metalinguistic negotiations). The second issue was: how could the method of conceptual engineering be assisted by other compatible methods at its different stages? For instance, we discussed how the tools and techniques of experimental philosophy could be used in the assessment and improvement stages of the conceptual engineering process. Additionally, the symposium also addressed a variety of foundational issues in the vicinity of conceptual engineering's methodological framework, its development, and its implementation.

The MET4CE symposium was comprised of ten 30-minute talks by established and up-and-coming scholars from Austria, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The talks presented at the symposium have produced 6 articles in peer-reviewed journals of philosophy (see Section 3 for the full reference list). In addition, the symposium was the starting point for a number of collaborative projects between several of its panel speakers. The symposium was organized by Manuel Gustavo Isaac.

2. The talks

In his talk titled *Broad-Spectrum Conceptual Engineering*, Manuel Gustavo Isaac introduced a variant of conceptual engineering that is expected to be appropriately applicable to any of our representation-involving cognitive activities, with major consequences for our whole cognitive life.

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[1] See the PhilPapers entry 'Conceptual engineering': https://philpapers.org/browse/conceptual-engineering.

Isaac focused his talk on the theoretical foundations of conceptual engineering thus characterized. With a view to ensuring the actionability of conceptual engineering as a broad-spectrum method, he addressed the issue of how best to construe the subject matter of conceptual engineering and argued that conceptual engineering should be: (i) about concepts, (ii) psychologically theorized, (iii) as multiply realized functional kinds. Thereby, Isaac claimed, we would theoretically secure and justify the maximum scope, flexibility, and impact for the method of conceptual engineering on our representational devices in our whole cognitive life — in other words, a broad-spectrum version of conceptual engineering.

In the same vein, Steffen Koch asked what are concepts, and how does one engineer them? Answering these questions, Koch observed, is of central importance for implementing and theorizing about conceptual engineering. In this talk titled *On Two Kinds of Conceptual Engineering and their Methodological Counterparts*, he discussed and criticized two influential views of this issue: semanticism, according to which conceptual engineers aim to change linguistic meanings, and psychologism, according to which conceptual engineers aim to change psychological structures. Koch argued that neither of these accounts can give us the full story. Instead, he proposed and defended the Dual Content View of Conceptual Engineering. On this view, conceptual engineering targets concepts, where concepts are understood as having two (interrelated) kinds of contents: referential content and cognitive content. Koch showed that this view is independently plausible and that it gives us a comprehensive account of conceptual engineering that helps to make progress on some of the most difficult problems surrounding conceptual engineering.

In her talk titled *Conceptual Engineering and Semantic Control*, Pollock defended an internalist approach to conceptual engineering in response to an argument from Cappelen (2018). Cappelen proposes a radically externalist framework for conceptual engineering, which embraces the following two theses. Firstly, the mechanisms that underlie conceptual engineering are inscrutable: they are too complex, unstable, and non-systematic for us to grasp. Secondly, the process of conceptual engineering is largely beyond our control. Cappelen argues that these two commitments — 'Inscrutability' and 'Lack of Control' — must be accepted by both externalist and internalist views of meaning and concepts. For the internalist to avoid commitment to these theses, she must provide arguments for 3 claims: (a) there are inner states that are scrutable and within our control; (b) concepts supervene on these inner states; and (c) the determination relation from supervenience base to content is itself scrutable and within our control. Pollock responded to Cappelen by demonstrating how some kinds of internalist can meet these challenges. She argued that (a) it is plausible that we have a weak sort of control over some of our inner states, some of the time; (b) it is reasonable to treat concepts as supervening on these states, as the resultant view is largely in keeping with widely accepted desiderata on a theory of concepts; and (c) we should appeal, not to mere supervenience, but to alternative relations such as identity or realization in order secure the result that the relation from determination base to content is both scrutable and within our control.

Delia Belleri's talk, titled *Downplaying the Topic-Change Objection to Conceptual Engineering*, touched on yet another foundational issue in conceptual engineering. Projects of conceptual engineering may face the following Strawsonian objection: once a concept, C, has been revised, one cannot have continuity in inquiry with the newly engineered concept, C'. The conceptual engineer has "changed the subject". Cappelen's (2018) answer to this objection invokes topics, which are representations of what a concept "is about" that are coarser grained than intensions and extensions. Cappelen argues that we can have continuity of topic even if a concept's intension or extension undergo change. After pointing out some difficulties for Cappelen's approach, Belleri argued that inquirers can ask their questions while operating in different contexts. In contexts of Type 1, the questions they ask are to be interpreted as object-level and descriptive; in these contexts, change of subject is indeed a problem. In contexts of Type 2, however, the questions they ask are to be interpreted as meta-level and normative. Belleri argued that subject-change need not be a problem in Type-2 contexts. Indeed, it can be expected or even welcomed. This leads to conceding the Strawsonian objection in contexts of Type 1, but also to a downplaying, or dismissal of the same objection in contexts of Type 2. In closing, Belleri suggested that conceptual engineers explicitly acknowledge that their inquiry is of Type 2, to neutralize the dialectical threat posed by the Strawsonian objection.

With Georg Brun and Kevin Reuter's talk titled *The Common-Sense Notion of 'Truth' as a Challenge for Conceptual Re-Engineering*, the symposium moved on to applied case studies in

conceptual engineering. Tarski claims, the speakers recalled, that his theory of truth provides an explication of 'true' that is sufficiently similar to the ordinary notion of truth, which he interpreted in the sense of correspondence with reality. In the first part of their talk, Brun and Reuter presented results of experimental studies which challenge the idea that — within the empirical domain — the common-sense notion of truth is rooted in correspondence. When participants were presented with situations in which correspondence and coherence come apart, a substantial number (in some experiments up to 60%) responded in line with the predictions of the coherence account. These results challenge monistic accounts of truth as well as their most popular alternative: scope pluralism. In the second part of their talk. Brun and Reuter explored the consequences of these results for the project of re-engineering *truth.* Three proposals were discussed. (i) Defending a unique explication of truth might seem attractive for theoretical reasons, but would, given the results of the presented studies, amount to dismissing a great deal of applications of the truth-predicate. (ii) The idea of re-engineering truth as a non-classical concept (e.g., as a family resemblance concept) raises the challenge of finding such a concept which does not only explain the data of the presented studies but also has a convincing and theoretically fruitful structure. (iii) Giving more than one explicatum for *true* is promising in light of the data and substantiates the claim that 'truth' is ambiguous, but we need to know more about the mechanisms that play a role in ordinary discourses on truth.

Finally, Lieven Decock presented in his talk another insightful case study for future applications of the method of conceptual engineering. Decock analyzed conceptual change and conceptual engineering in the case of color concepts. This special case raises the prospects of conceptual engineering because a precise standard for measuring the amelioration of the structure of concepts is available. On the other hand, the study highlights the problems with controlling conceptual engineering pointed out by Cappelen. Decock argued that in the case of conceptual change of color concepts varying degrees of optimization, design and control are possible. This observation can be generalized to other classes of concepts. As a result, the scope of conceptual engineering is reduced considerably; conceptual engineering appears as a limit case of conceptual change, Decock concluded.

Besides the above contributions, the MET4CE symposium also included the four following talks: *Conceptual Engineering in the Philosophy of Information* by Patrick Allo (Free University of Brussels), *The Methodological Tradition of Explication* by Moritz Cordes (University of Greifswald), *Concepts and Replacement: What Should the Carnapian Model of Conceptual Re-Engineering Be?* by Mark Pinder (Open University), and *The Semantic Account of Slurs, Appropriation, and Meta-linguistic Negotiations* by Esa Díaz-León (University of Barcelona).

3. Outputs

The MET4CE symposium has resulted in the following peer-reviewed publications.

1. Belleri, Delia (2021). "Downplaying the change of subject objection to conceptual engineering". *Inquiry*. Online first. DOI: 10.1080/0020174X.2021.190816.1.
2. Decock, Lieven (2021) "Conceptual change and conceptual engineering: The case of colour concepts". *Inquiry* 64 (1–2), 168–185. DOI: 10.1080/0020174X.2020.1784783.
3. Isaac, Manuel Gustavo (2021). "Broad-spectrum conceptual engineering". *Ratio* 34 (4), 286–302. DOI: 10.1111/rati.12311.
4. Koch, Steffen (2021). "Engineering what? On concepts in conceptual engineering". *Synthese* 199 (1–2), 1955–1975. DOI: 10.1007/s11229-020-02868-w.
5. Pollock, Joey (2021). "Content internalism and conceptual engineering". *Synthese* 198 (12), 11587–11605. DOI: 10.1007/s11229-020-02815-9.
6. Reuter, Kevin and Georg Brun (2021). "Empirical studies on *Truth* and the project of re-engineering *Truth*". *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*. Online first. DOI: 10.1111/papq.12370.

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Brun, Georg (2016). "Explication as a method of conceptual re-engineering". *Erkenntnis* 81 (6), 1211–1241.

Cappelen, Herman (2018). *Fixing Language: An Essay on Conceptual Engineering*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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Floridi, Luciano (2011). "A defence of constructionism: Philosophy as conceptual engineering". *Metaphilosophy* 42 (3), 282–304.

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