

All words are equal,
but some words are more equal than others:
What the Scope of Conceptual Engineering
Should Be



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Abstract

In this thesis, I argue for a realistic account of what conceptual engineering can hope to achieve when engineering concepts. I criticize conceptual engineers for not taking the implementation challenge, and problems with the feasibility of their proposals, into account when proposing to change concepts, threatening to trivialize conceptual engineering. In addition, conceptual engineers have had a tendency to expect too much from concepts, and suggest extensive changes to the meaning to *all* uses of a concept. As a solution, I suggest *Fabianism*, which is to have apparent goals, and realistic tactics to achieve those goals. Specifically, I suggest three remedies, which is to (a) view concepts as embedded in frameworks, and (b) make less extensive changes to the meaning of (c) only *some* (or one) uses of concepts. Essentially, I argue that we should engineer *conceptual frameworks*, and not *individual concepts*. In the second part of the thesis, I explore an implication of Fabianism on the way that conceptual engineers assess concepts, concluding that we should assess concepts by the functions they perform in a conceptual framework, which has not been the predominant view of concept assessment in conceptual engineering.

Sammendrag

I denne oppgaven argumenterer jeg for en realistisk redegjørelse av hva conceptual engineering kan håpe på å oppnå når de reviderer begreper. Jeg kritiserer begreps-ingeniørene for å ikke ta noen av utfordringene med prosjektet deres seriøst, og at dette truer med å gjøre prosjektet ugjennomførbart og nytteløst. I tillegg har begreps-ingeniørene en tendens til å forvente for mye av begreper, og foreslår for store forandringer ved meningen av begreper i alle bruksformer. Som løsning foreslår jeg Fabianisme, som innehar å ha åpenbare mål, og realistisk taktikk for å oppnå disse målene. Spesifikt, så foreslår jeg tre bøtemidler: (a) å se begreper som inegrert i et rammeverk, (b) gjøre mindre forandringer ved meningen av begreper og (c) forandre bare en eller noen av begrepsbrukene. I hovedsak, så argumenterer jeg for at vi bør revidere våre rammeverk, og ikke individuelle begreper. I denne oppgavens andre del så vurderer jeg en implikasjon av Fabianisme på hvordan begreper bør *vurderes* i conceptual engineering. Jeg konkluderer med at vi bør vurdere begreper basert på *funksjoner* som begrepene utfyller i et rammeverk, som ikke har vært den dominerende tilnærmingen til begrepsvurdering i conceptual engineering.

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Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) revised the names of the variants of the coronavirus from their geographical places of discovery to Greek letters: Alpha (~~British variant~~), Beta (~~South African variant~~), Delta (~~Indian variant~~), etc. The reason behind the revision was stigmatization. When naming a virus strain after a country, that country- and its citizens - become associated with, and even blamed for the particular strain. The countries were effectively punished for making scientific discoveries, which is a disincentive to discover and disclose new variants.¹

The revision made by the WHO is an example of an activity that in much recent work has been referred to as Conceptual Engineering (CE). CE is a philosophical method with the aim of improving the tools that we use to understand the world, to better think and theorize about it. The linguistic tools are terms and concepts that give a framework for thinking. What is special about CE is that it takes a *normative* approach to philosophical problems and questions.² Instead of asking what concepts like BELIEF, KNOWLEDGE, GENDER and RACE *actually* mean, a conceptual engineer asks what these concepts *should* mean.³ In the example above the attempt is not to accurately track the meaning of the virus strains, but rather to designate them in a useful way that avoids stigmatization.

The focus in this thesis is on the scope of CE, and the question of what the method can conceivably achieve. CE faces some severe issues of feasibility and implementation. The implementation challenge is that few, if any, of the proposals that conceptual engineers are making are actually being implemented. What is the purpose of trying to engineer concepts if the proposals never take effect? The issues regarding feasibility have to do with ignoring empirical research about how concepts and conceptual schemes work. I draw on work from Edouard Machery, Allison Koslow and Eugen Fischer, who all question the feasibility of CE.⁴ For example, even if the implementation should succeed, psycholinguistic research indicates that people would not adopt these new concepts.⁵ In my opinion, CE is also vulnerable to the Duhem-Quine problem, which states that propositions - and in extension, *concepts* - can neither

¹ As emphasized by an epidemiologist based in the WHO: “No country should be stigmatized for detecting and reporting variants” (Kerkhove, 2021).

² Koch, 2022.

³ Concepts are designated in SMALL CAPS.

⁴ Koslow, 2022; Machery, 2021; Fischer, 2020.

⁵ Koslow, 2022.

be supported nor falsified on their own.⁶ Conceptual engineers are trying to assess and fix *individual* concepts in a vacuum, when concepts are defined by other concepts, help define even other concepts, and only makes sense according to the framework in which it is located. In CE, they expect too much from concepts. Concepts do not have the same predictive and explanatory power as theories, and so concepts should be used as tools to aid theories and movements, instead of making changes happen themselves. I believe that conceptual engineers have not taken these issues seriously when forming their proposals, instead giving ideal proposals, not grounded in what is realistically possible to achieve.

Even without the problems of feasibility and implementation, I do not think that the best method is to propose revolutionary suggestions in their full splendor.⁷ Rather, conceptual engineers should try to make minor, realistic and less controversial changes that will gradually take us closer to whatever the goals of the engineering projects are. I argue that conceptual engineers should have apparent goals, and realistic tactics when engineering concepts to achieve those goals, a position I call Fabianism:⁸

Fabianism = Conceptual engineers should have apparent goals, and realistic tactics when engineering concepts to achieve those goals.

There are two important reasons for having apparent goals. First, if a goal is apparent, then we can evaluate the goal. We can, for example, criticize the Russian government for trying to engineer the concept *NAZISM* (to connect the concept to Western ideals) with the goal/purpose of justifying an invasion of Ukraine. Second, if a goal is apparent then it is easier to evaluate whether the tactics to achieve that goal are coherent.

When it comes to realistic tactics, I believe that not only have problems of feasibility and implementation been largely ignored, but conceptual engineers have had a tendency to (a) *expect too much from concepts*, and propose (b) *extensive meaning change* to (c) *all uses of a concept*. All three overestimations result in questionable feasibility and low likelihood of implementation. I propose to remedy these overestimations by, respectively, viewing concepts as embedded in frameworks, making less extensive changes to the meaning of concepts and to engineer retail

⁶ Stanford, 2021.

⁷ E.g. Haslanger's (2002) proposal to change the concept of *woman*, so that 'a woman is a subordinated female'.

⁸ Fabianism is advancing democratic principles via gradualist and reformist efforts, rather than revolutionary ones. Fabianism got their name from the general who beat the stronger force of Hannibal by not attacking him head on, but with a more patient and elusive tactic. The analogy for CE is due Appiah (2022), but I augment it.

(some uses of a concepts) instead of wholesale (all uses of a concept).⁹ Put together, these three remedies make CE projects much more feasible and likely to be implemented.

In sum, I propose that conceptual engineers adopt Fabianism, which is to have apparent goals and realistic proposals to achieve those goals. There are three ways in which the proposals can be more realistic, and that is to make small changes to some uses of a concept for the purpose of aiding a theory or framework. Essentially, Fabianism states that we should engineer conceptual frameworks, and not individual concepts.

A direct implication of Fabianism is a functionalist view of concepts because both are focusing on conceptual frameworks, and not on individual concepts. In Part II, I focus on how adopting a functionalist view of concepts affects the way that conceptual engineers assess concepts. I conclude that concepts should be assessed comparatively, according to how they function in a framework, and not categorically, according to some intrinsic properties that are defective in an individual concept, as only the former is coherent with Fabianism.

The thesis consists of six chapters, four in Part I, two in Part II. In the first three chapters, I try to keep it kosher.¹⁰ I introduce, in Chapter 1, what CE is, and the fundamental reason for engaging in the method. As we shall see, CE is not limited to fixing concepts in philosophy, nor does it entail improvement. In fact, something like CE is happening all of the time in many aspects of the world. I outline, in Chapter 2, the way in which conceptual engineers go about improving our concepts and conceptual schemes. There are three broad ways: improve terminology (like the covid variant case above), conceptual repair (to fix defective concepts) and conceptual innovation (to invent or repurpose concepts). I present, in Chapter 3, four foundational issues with CE, two of which are the aforementioned issues with feasibility and implementation. These issues lead me to conclude, in Chapter 4, that we should adopt Fabianism. In part II, and Chapter 5, I present the two different ways in which conceptual engineers have been assessing concepts: comparative and categorical. In Chapter 6, I demonstrate that only one of the ways in which conceptual engineers have been assessing concepts, a comparative approach, is coherent with a functionalist view of concepts, and therefore coherent with Fabianism.

⁹ The last distinction is by Eklund (2021a).

¹⁰ The Kosher Principle, in writing, is to not mix ingredients (criticizing, describing) that do not fit together (Stimson 2010, p. 2).

Some final remarks before we embark on Part I. Firstly, I suspend judgment over whether *concepts are the meaning of terms or whether they are mental representations*. Concepts are, minimally, things that words can mean. There is, however, a relationship between terms and concepts to the point that some terms fail to have concepts, and some terms are polysemous (multiple concepts related to them).¹¹ I believe that taking a stand on what concepts are (if that is the subject matter) is very important when giving a proposal to change a concept, as I will argue for in Chapter 4, but I am not giving such a proposal here. Secondly, even though a functionalist account of concepts follows from Fabianism, it is not dependent on Fabianism. Even without adopting Fabianism, I believe that viewing concepts as fulfilling, or performing functions, is a fruitful tool that conceptual engineers should use. Lastly, the motivation for this thesis is to make CE more accessible and more grounded in reality. CE has gained much interest in its short lifespan as a philosophical field, but it seems to have a bad reputation in some circles.¹² I think we can attribute this bad reputation, at least partly, to a somewhat naive and idealistic view of what can be achieved by the mere changing of concepts, and not taking seriously the challenges that CE faces. Remediating this, I hope that CE can continue to rise as a philosophical field, but also achieve some genuine contributions to philosophy and other academic disciplines.

¹¹ If I am forced to make a choice, which I might be in Part II, I am lenient towards a referentialist view of concepts, and viewing concepts as entities that fulfill functions.

¹² Timothy Williamson, for one, expressed doubts about CE in a talk held by Cappelen (2021b).

Part I

Fabianism

Chapter 1. Conceptual Engineering

The interest around CE has grown exponentially over the last few years.¹³ The method of CE is not entirely new, however. The method of improving, prescribing or revising concepts has been attributed to philosophers like Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, Nietzsche, Frege, Quine, Carnap, Floridi and many others.¹⁴ Herman Cappelen sets up a kind of genealogy of the history of philosophy as a battle between descriptivists and revisionists.¹⁵ The lines are not always clear-cut, but the two attitudes of either describing language or revising language can be seen again and again. Indeed, Cappelen postulates that the descriptivist turn in philosophy “[W]as motivated, in part, by the perception that many of those who saw themselves engaged in various revisionary projects did not have enough understanding of what they were criticizing.”¹⁶ The notion of revising, improving and prescribing concepts is not new, then. What is new is that this method has become its own field in philosophy, so that philosophers can figure out how to best go about doing it.

This first chapter serves as an introduction to CE, consisting of two sections. I begin the chapter by presenting what CE is, first giving two paradigmatic cases, and then focusing on the three, in my opinion, most important and interesting aspects to CE: normativity, utility and intention. I end Section 1 showing that CE is not limited to philosophy, and nor does it necessarily imply improvement. In Section 2, I explore the main motivation for engaging in the method of CE, which is a basic assumption that the concepts we have are not the best concepts we could have, known as ‘the master argument’.

1.1 What Is Conceptual Engineering?

In CE, concepts are tools to employ, assess and improve upon in order to better understand the world, making the world a better place and solving (philosophical) problems.¹⁷ CE concerns a wide array of projects *within* the field of philosophy: Sally Haslanger’s proposal to ameliorate gender concepts in order to promote social justice and equal rights; Kevin Scharp’s proposal to replace the concept of TRUTH in order to avoid alethic paradoxes; Clark & Chalmers proposal to

¹³ Cappelen (2020b, p. 594): “In my lifetime, I have never seen interest in a philosophical topic grow with such explosive intensity.”

¹⁴ See, for instance, Cappelen (2018, p. 22); Floridi (2011); Thomasson (2021, p. 3).

¹⁵ Cappelen, 2018, p. 24.

¹⁶ Cappelen, 2018, pp. 24-25.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Cappelen (2018, p. 137); Haslanger (2000; 2012); Pinder (2022).

revise the concept of BELIEF to make the concept more unified and useful.¹⁸ CE also concerns a wide array of projects *outside* of philosophy: The International Astronomical Union revision of the concept PLANET to improve the categorization of the solar system; the improvement of the concept GENE to allow for a more context-sensitive usage in biology; Carl Linnaeus classification of whales from being in the extension of FISH to being in the extension of MAMMAL; American Psychiatric Association removing ASPERGER'S SYNDROME as a distinct mental disorder, including it instead as part of the Autism Spectrum.¹⁹

The three most important things that unites these examples, and makes them examples of CE, as I see it, are *intention*, *normativity* and *utility*. I start with the latter two, in combination, before moving on to intention. But first, to get a better idea of what CE is, let us consider two paradigmatic cases of CE to which we will return throughout.

1.1.1 Engineering TRUTH and WOMAN

According to Kevin Scharp, the concept TRUTH is defective because it is an inconsistent concept.²⁰ TRUTH is inconsistent because it contains semantic paradoxes. The most famous example is the liar paradox: “This sentence is false”. Either this sentence is both true and false at the same time, or it is neither true nor false. Since truth is inconsistent, says Scharp, it makes it a difficult concept to work with without risking paradoxical results. Scharp’s solution is to replace the concept of truth with a pair of concepts that avoid these paradoxes: ascending truth and descending truth. Combined, Scharp suggests that they will continue to do the job that truth did, without descending into paradoxes.

Sally Haslanger calls her approach (conceptual) *amelioration*, because she proposes to use concepts as tools in the fight for social justice - to ameliorate the world, so to speak.²¹ While Scharp’s interest is academic, Haslanger’s interest is political. Haslanger proposes that we should ameliorate our gender concepts to better our understanding of social reality. Her proposal to ameliorate WOMAN, specifically, is to include subordination into the intension of the concept (and definition of the term ‘woman’). The motivating idea is that changing the concept will give attention to the subordination of women, and therefore, might help fight it. Put a bit differently,

¹⁸ Haslanger (2000; 2012); Scharp (2013); Clark & Chalmers (1998).

¹⁹ See, for instance (in respective order): Egré & O’Madagain (2019); Brigandt (2010); Sainsbury (2013); American Psychiatric Association, 2013.

²⁰ Scharp, 2013.

²¹ Haslanger, 2000; 2012.

Haslanger proposes that we use the term ‘woman’ to designate a slightly different conception of WOMAN, one that includes subordination. An ironic consequence of this proposal is that the goal is to have *no more women* because then there would be no more subordination of females. “I believe it is part of the project of feminism to bring about a day when there are no more women (though, of course, we should not aim to do away with females!).”²² Haslanger’s amelioration of WOMAN will be of focus in Chapter 4.

1.1.2 Normativity & Utility

A conceptual engineer takes a normative approach to traditional philosophical questions, not asking what our concepts actually mean, but what our concepts *should* mean.²³ Take the concept of MARRIAGE, which used to be (and still is, in some places) limited to being between a man and a woman. Religion aside, there are no reasons why people of the same sex should not be able to get married.²⁴ Given this, why call it ‘gay marriage’, or even ‘schmarriage’, instead of simply ‘marriage’.²⁵ One social concern of inventing a new term for people of same sex who want to marry is causing dissimulation as it signifies that this group of people are not normal people having a “normal” marriage. One concern with singling out the marriage as ‘gay marriage’ is that it indicates, or at least hints, that this kind of marriage is somehow wrong. Just consider other examples of adding a description: ‘child marriage’, ‘forced marriage’ and ‘arranged marriage’. For these reasons, an argument can be made that people of same sex should be included in the extension of the concept MARRIAGE. This is a normative approach to what MARRIAGE *should* be, and not a descriptive account capturing the prominent use of the concept.

While traditionally philosophers have attempted to accurately *describe* concepts’ usages, conceptual engineers want to actively *use* concepts for particular purposes. The purposes might be to solve or understand a philosophical problem, normalize marriage between people of the same sex or lessen stigmatization because of a virus. The point is that concepts can be used as tools to achieve these purposes; CE is all about how concepts can be useful to us. To help

²² Haslanger, 2000, p. 46.

²³ Koch, 2022

²⁴ There is one reason: if we have somehow defined MARRIAGE as being between one man and one woman, the two people of same sex, or multiple people, cannot be married as a matter of definition. It is a contradiction in terms. This is, however, exactly why it should be possible to change the concept, or its definition, to what it ought to be, and not be constrained by what it actually has meant in the past.

²⁵ ‘Schmarriage’ was suggested by the conceptual analyst Detusch in a webinar. In his defense, he used it as a counterargument, and probably did not intend for it to be an actual proposal.

illustrate this point, consider an example of conceptual analysis (CA), and the case we just considered from Scharp (CE) on the concept of TRUTH.

Wolfgang Kühne *analyzes* the concept, while Kevin Scharp *engineers* the concept of TRUTH.²⁶ The analysis and engineering both are based on problems with TRUTH, namely that it contains paradoxes; or that theorizing with truth may lead you into paradoxical thinking, as with the liar paradox. Kühne's approach is to examine the concept's use in everyday language, and by doing this illustrate *how* TRUTH leads to paradoxes. Scharp, on the other hand, actively uses the concept in an attempt to *solve* the paradoxes (or at least avoid them). In the first instance, the *analyst* wants to correctly *describe* TRUTH, and analyze how it leads to paradoxes. In the second instance, the *engineer* wants to solve the paradoxes, *prescribing* an improved conception of TRUTH.

The point here is not to say that one method is better than another. Several conceptual engineers support both ways of doing philosophy, and do not see them as necessarily competing.²⁷ There are others, however, who believe that we have spent too much time on CA:

Too much ink has been spilt on philosophy as conceptual analysis. The alternative view, that philosophy is at least as much, if not actually more, engaged with creating, refining, and fitting together our conceptual artefacts in order to answer open questions, that is, questions that are not answerable in principle empirically or mathematically, has received too little attention.²⁸

Whether or not too much ink has been spilled on CA, it seems quite interesting to engage with creating, refining and fitting together our concepts or conceptual scheme. Can we, however, actually make these changes happen?

1.1.2 Effecting Conceptual Change

Concepts, and the relationships between concepts, change all the time. This is *conceptual change*. Understanding this process - what makes concepts change and why - is difficult, and has generated much interest especially in cognitive psychology and philosophy of science.²⁹

Sometimes concepts might change because of scientific discoveries or compelling arguments, but other times it is more difficult to figure out exactly what sparked the change. Cappelen

²⁶ Kühne, 2005; Scharp, 2013.

²⁷ Glock (2020) distinguishes between conceptual engineers who adopt a lenient view towards CA, for example, Haslanger, and conceptual engineers who repudiate CA, for example Cappelen and Jennifer Nado.

²⁸ Floridi, 2011, p. 293.

²⁹ See, for instance, Nersessian (1992) for an account on conceptual change in science.

writes, “[...] it seems plausible that in many cases there’s no ‘crucial event’ that triggers a change, but just tiny little effects of many verbal and nonverbal interactions between people.”³⁰ Understanding the ebbs and flows of conceptual changes seems difficult, if not impossible.

The interesting question in CE is not *if* conceptual changes happen, however, but if conceptual engineers can *effect* conceptual changes: to what degree can we guide and influence conceptual changes? Cappelen argues in his (2018) that we have little-to-no control over conceptual changes, and so CE faces a big implementation challenge. Strictly speaking, all of the proposals above, within philosophy, are no more than that: proposals. Changes to gender concepts, TRUTH and BELIEF have *not* been effected or implemented. What is the point of proposing changes, if the changes won’t be implemented? We return to this implementation challenge for CE in Section 3.4.

In science, contrarily, effected (or intentional) conceptual change happens all of the time. The examples of CE above, from to outside of philosophy, are all successful examples:³¹ PLANET, GENE, WHALE and ASPERGER’S SYNDROME. These are just some among many. Changing concepts in mathematics, physics and psychology, especially, is a common approach. Changes made to the The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM manual) is a perfect example of effecting conceptual changes. Let us consider the Aperger’s example in more detail, as it helps make two points. First, ASPERGER’S SYNDROMES (and AUTISM) has undergone several *intentional* conceptual changes. Second, that intentional conceptual change - and therefore CE - does not entail improvement.

In 2013, Asperger’s syndrome was removed from the DSM because of inconsistent application of the disorder, and similarities between individuals with Asperger’s and individuals with autism. The American Psychiatric Association decided that the clinical term should be removed from the DSM, and replaced with Autism Spectrum Disorder.³² The Asperger’s example shows that CE does not entail improvement. A CE project could be a successful change to our concepts or conceptual schemes, but it can also be merely a *proposal* to change. Removing ‘Asperger’s syndrome’ from the DSM might turn out to be a mistake. It might make a comeback

³⁰ Cappelen, 2018, p. 118.

³¹ By successful, here, I mean that the changes were implemented, not necessarily improvements. We do not know, yet, for example, if including Asperger’s into the Autism Spectrum is a long-term success.

³² American Psychiatric Association, 2013.

if/when they, for example, achieve more reliable methods.³³ Indeed, when the concept of ASPERGER'S SYNDROME was introduced in 1994, the purpose was to prompt researchers to identify potentially different subgroups of autism.³⁴ It can be argued that the introduction has caused regression in autism research. It is, at least, plausible to think that one of the moves - introducing or removing Asperger's from the DSM - was a worsening of the categorization of disorders.³⁵ The point is that a conceptual change, or proposal for conceptual change, does not have to be an improvement.

The last thing I want to mention about the connection between CE and intent is that the intention behind a (proposal for) conceptual change does not have to be good. Even if the introduction of Asperger's into the DSM was mistaken, at least the intention behind the introduction was good (to prompt autism research). This is not always the case. Politicians, to take the usual suspects, might have reasons for distorting the language, hiding behind euphemisms and vagueness. George Orwell's book *1984* is perhaps the most vivid encapsulation of euphemisms, where he introduces a new language, *newspeak*, designed to diminish the range of thought. For better or for worse, *newspeak* is an example of CE.

Here is Orwell in an article just before writing the "dystopia":

Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*.³⁶

These are all examples of *newspeak* in an *actual* society, and not just in a fictional one. A palpable recent example is the oxymoron: 'alternative facts', uttered in an attempt to explain a

³³ An interesting question here is whether the *concept* ASPERGER'S SYNDROME has been removed/replaced or merely the *term* 'asperger's syndrome'? The term has not left our diction. Many people who received the diagnosis in the past still identify as *Aspies*, and so the concept has not been replaced by Autism in everyday life. The concept has been replaced in psychiatry, however, which is the goal of the revision in the DSM.

³⁴ Klin & Volkmar, 2003. Introducing a concept to designate a phenomena is an example of conceptual innovation (see Chapter 2).

³⁵ I shall not endeavor into a long conceptual history of autism, but it is a concept that has undergone many changes. Autism was only first described by Leo Kanner in 1943, and first introduced in the second edition of the DSM in 1952. At the time, autism was wrongly deemed a childhood schizophrenia, and this was not revised until the third edition of the DSM in the 1980's. Not until the 1990s, however, did psychiatrists decide to designate autism as a spectrum ranging from mild to severe, because they could not isolate the genes related to the syndrome. To this day, autism does not really have any specific causes or sufficient and necessary conditions. My sister, to name just one example, has been diagnosed with autism as a lack of other options.

³⁶ Orwell, 1946, p. 136.

set of facts that contradicts truth.³⁷ Alternative facts are not facts, they are simply falsehoods.³⁸ Politicians still hide behind unclear language and words with distorted meanings (like ‘fake news’, ‘wokeness’, etc.) because it serves a purpose. In a sense, CE is only an improvement relative to a certain goal, which might not be a good goal.

To illustrate that the goal need not be good, consider a recent example where the Russian government engineers the concept of NAZISM to facilitate a Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Russians seem to have created a narrative around the concept of NAZISM, connecting it to western ideals (for example, LGBT). The Russians fought nazi ideals in the 40’s, and believe themselves obligated to do so again. Or so goes the propaganda that the Russian government is creating to antagonize against a certain picture of the west, and western ideals, with the purpose of convincing their citizens to support liberation of Ukraine.

CE is, then, not necessarily an improvement, nor does it need its proponents to have good intentions. These could be given as reasons for *not* engaging in CE, but I think they are reasons for getting it right. We need to be able to distinguish between good proposals and bad ones. Changing language for good, and not for bad, should be one of the motivations for engaging in the method, not barring it.

1.2 Why Conceptual Engineering? The Master Argument

There are many reasons for engaging in the method of CE. We have touched on a few: lessening stigmatization (the covid variant case), promoting social justice (changing the concepts of RACE and WOMAN) or making concepts more fruitful in the sciences (for example PLANET). Here I want to focus on a more basic motivation, which also happens to be an assumption. Fundamentally, the notion that concepts can be criticized and improved upon is based on the assumption that the concepts that we currently have are not necessarily the best concepts that we *could* have. If this assumption is true, then it is the fundamental motivation for engaging in CE: obtaining the best possible tools (concepts) in order to better think and theorize about the world. It is an assumption

³⁷ NBC News, 2017.

³⁸ Alternative facts could be a good expression for falsehoods expressed as facts, but this is what ‘fake news’ is supposed to designate. Sadly, fake news has been used and misused in so many different ways, the expression seems to have lost its agreed upon definition (if there ever was one). Alternative facts and fake news are expressions in need of engineering.

often left implicit, but that most, if not all, CE projects share. Herman Cappelen sums it up, in what he acutely calls ‘the master argument’:

1. If W is a word that has a meaning M, then there are many similar meanings, M_1, M_2, \dots, M_n , W could have.
2. We have no good reason to think that the meaning that W ended up with is the best meaning W could have: there will typically be indefinitely many alternative meanings that would be better meanings for W.
3. When we speak, think, and theorize it’s important to make sure our words have as good meanings as possible.
4. As a corollary: when doing philosophy, we should try to find good meanings for core philosophical terms and they will typically not be the meanings those words as a matter of fact have.³⁹

Let us unpack this, as the validity of the master argument seems essential for the validity of CE projects, more generally. In addition, the master argument sets the premise for the notion that concepts can be defective, relevant in Part II.

The first premise states that a word, say 'salad', could have meaning M_1 : 'a lunch consisting of only vegetables and fruit' or meaning M_2 : 'any meal consisting of vegetables and fruit' or meaning M_3 : 'any meal that is reasonably healthy', etc.' The choice of the example is not arbitrary, because SALAD has had similar meanings - and more - throughout its lifetime.⁴⁰ The point is simply that concepts do not have stable meanings, a point we touched on with AUTISM above. In addition, people have different views about what the meaning of SALAD actually is, or should be. The first premise seems an acceptable one since conceptual changes happen and that we can disagree about the best meaning of a concept.⁴¹

The second premise is based on a Nietzschean notion:

Hitherto one has generally trusted one’s concepts as if they were a wonderful dowry from some sort of wonderland: but they are, after all, the inheritance from our most remote, most foolish as well as most intelligent ancestors [...] What is needed above all is an absolute skepticism toward all inherited concepts.⁴²

This is a much-quoted phrase in CE, because it nicely sums up the spirit of CE: *do not accept concepts at face value*. Concepts often guide people into a certain way of thinking and, intentionally or not, this is something to be wary of.⁴³ The fact that there has been conceptual changes, both in philosophy and beyond, is proof that concepts do not automatically end up with

³⁹ Do not be confused by the terminology here. Cappelen (2020, p. 134) prefers to talk about words and their meanings, instead of concepts. Consider, therefore, a word with the meaning M_1 as being one concept C, and a word with a meaning M_2 as being another concept C*.

⁴⁰ Dorr & Hawthorne, 2014.

⁴¹ There is a chink in the armor: what does *similar meanings* mean, how do we know if the meanings are similar enough and why do the meanings have to be similar in the first place? We return to these questions in Chapters 3 and 4.

⁴² Nietzsche, 1901/68, section 409.

⁴³ C.f. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis: language influences the way one thinks about reality.

the best meaning. People thought whales were fish, but it turns out that whales are mammals. Mammals and fish are types of SPECIES, which is in itself a heavily contested concept.⁴⁴ The boundaries between species are unclear, and the concept SPECIES often have animals in their extension that fail to qualify certain requirements. A key aspect of being a bird is being able to fly, but then what about flightless birds such as ostriches and penguins?⁴⁵

To say that there is “no good reason” to think that a word has ended up with the best meaning it could have - especially with core philosophical concepts, which is Cappelen’s main interest here - is a strong claim. Yet, much of the history of philosophy seems to be a disagreement about definitions about core concepts like KNOWLEDGE, BELIEF, CONCEPT, ASSERTION, JUSTICE, ART, just to name a few.⁴⁶ What reasons do contemporary philosophers have to believe that they finally got it right? One of the motivations for CE is to move away from this obsession with definitions - with the *is*, and instead ask what a concept *ought* to mean. In either case, I support Cappelen’s notion that the work is never done:

If we simply accept automatically the concepts we use in our everyday language or in a specialist field, we are already locked into a particular way of thinking. From the outset we quickly take the wrong path if we do not first ask ourselves whether the concepts are good enough.⁴⁷

The third premise of the master argument should be uncontroversial: in speaking, thinking and theorizing it is important to have the best tools (concepts) possible. It is easier to cut a tree with an ax or a chainsaw than it is alone with a two-man crosscut saw (also called a misery whip). The point of the first two premises is that we do not know whether we have an ax, a chainsaw or a misery whip. The point of the third premise is that the better the tools, the better we are equipped to do the job at hand, whether it be carpentry or philosophy. Perhaps inspired by Timothy Williamson, Cappelen often stresses that “we can do better,”⁴⁸ which seems to encapsulate the first three premises of the master argument.

⁴⁴ Kitcher, 1984.

⁴⁵ The second premise depends on what Matti Eklund (2020) calls the variance thesis: “A variance thesis is, generally stated, a thesis to the effect that there is a multitude of different concepts of some particular kind and none of them is privileged.” Chalmers (2020) argues for something similar, in what he calls *concept pluralism*. This notion, or perhaps assumption, embeds into a deeper philosophical problem about *reference* in philosophy, which is beyond the scope of this thesis. See, for instance, Cappelen & Dever (2018, p. 189-95) for a discussion on the topic.

⁴⁶ These are all so-called *contested concepts* (Gallie, 1955).

⁴⁷ Cappelen, 2015.

⁴⁸ Cappelen (2021a; 2021c) stresses this in two webinars: the first on eliminating DEMOCRACY, the second on eliminating ART. Williamson’s (2006) mantra is, “Must do better.”

If one accepts the three premises, the conclusion (4) follows, but perhaps not as strong. Cappelen seems to rely on an assumption here: *most* core philosophical [concepts] are defective.⁴⁹ It is quite a natural arithmetical conclusion from premise 1 and 2, since there are more possible meanings that concepts *can* have, than meanings that the concepts actually have. Still you can buy the argument that *several* core philosophical terms have not ended up with the best meaning that they could have, without accepting that *most* of them have. We could accept the premises, but only agree to a weaker conclusion: we should try to find good meanings for core philosophical terms and they *might* not be the meanings those words as a matter of fact have. This is perfectly fine. Now, we are not sharing the assumption that most of our concepts are defective.⁵⁰

Matti Eklund uses the terminology of possible- and actual concepts, a terminology I quite like. Call the concept that we actually use in a particular context for a particular purpose *the actual concept*, and the concepts we could use instead *possible concepts*.⁵¹ Cappelen's master argument, with this new terminology, summed up: (1) given that there are many possible concepts, (2) that there is no reason why the actual concept is the best concept, and (3) that better concepts make for better discourse, (4) philosophers should try to attain the best actual concepts when doing philosophy. But how exactly do we go about doing this?

Chapter 2. How to Make Better Concepts?

⁴⁹ Scharp (2013; 2020) explicitly argues that most, if not *all*, (philosophically interesting) concepts are defective.

⁵⁰ Cappelen focuses on core philosophical terms, while in this thesis we do not limit ourselves to philosophical terms, core or peripheral.

⁵¹ A distinction by Eklund (2021b). Strictly speaking, the actual concepts are actual in addition to being possible.

The purpose of this chapter is simply to consider how to go about improving concepts and our conceptual schemes.⁵² Improving concepts is often used synonymously with amelioration.⁵³ We can divide amelioration into three broad strategies: terminological improvement, conceptual repair and conceptual innovation.⁵⁴ Terminological improvement is to fix our labels for concepts. Conceptual repair is to fix defective words and concepts, while conceptual innovation is to invent or repurpose concepts to improve our conceptual scheme. Let us consider each in turn, but first a terminological remark.

I find it helpful to view change of meaning as either changing the intension or extension of a concept. A change in extension is simply deciding what the concept should include. A change in intension is changing the core of a concept (internal meaning), its definition or its criteria (necessary and sufficient conditions).⁵⁵ As an example, Pluto used to be in the extension of PLANET when a planet was defined by having nine canonical instances. Pluto was excluded from PLANET when The International Astronomical Union created necessary- and sufficient conditions for a celestial object to qualify as a planet (changing the intension of the concept).⁵⁶

2.1 Terminological Improvement

Terminological improvement is to make a change to the label, or the term of a concept. There is no attempted change to the meaning of the concept (its extensions and intensions). The Covid Variant Case from the introduction is an engineering of the labels of the covid variants. Another example is different proposals to change the name of the method *Conceptual Engineering*.⁵⁷ These proposals are merely suggestions to change the name of the method, not the method itself.

The main motivation for engineering labels is that how we speak about things affect how we think about things. When the Covid Variants share names with countries this causes stigmatization against those countries, as if they somehow created the virus variants. An even better example is the “Spanish Flu”. The countries involved in the First World War would not

⁵² Conceptual repair is primarily concerned with concepts, while conceptual innovation is concerned with conceptual schemes.

⁵³ The term amelioration is used in CE not just to designate Haslanger’s project, but more generally to designate proposals to improve concepts. I give an opinion on what is actually getting ameliorated in Section 4.1.

⁵⁴ Simion & Kelp, 2020.

⁵⁵ More accurately, intension is a word or concept’s meaning across possible worlds, while extension is what the word/concept picks out in this possible world.

⁵⁶ We revisit The Planet Case in more detail in Chapter 5.

⁵⁷ See, for instance, Isaac (2020).

admit to having a flu plaguing their country because that could show weakness and affect soldier morale. The Spanish, who were neutral, had no such reservations. When King Alfonso XIII came down with the flu, coverage spread. People from all over the world associated the flu with Spain - even blaming Spain for the Spanish flu (even as the first known case was in Kansas). In Spain, coincidentally, they called it the French flu.

There are many other motivations for engineering labels, for example because the current labels (a) cause some kind of bad effect like stigma, stereotyping and shame; (b) is misleading; (c) is inappropriate (as opposed to apt); etc. There might not even be anything wrong with a label, but a new name might be more catchy or better serve certain purposes. If, say, a company wants to expand their enterprise, then perhaps a local, Norwegian name does not serve the purpose of wanting to expand abroad.

Terminological improvement is not getting a lot of attention in CE, because it is viewed as a simple and uncontroversial method (and where is the fun in that). It is an important part of CE, however, especially when it comes to making changes in society. In addition, it is a phenomenon more popular than ever. For example, changing or using correct gender pronouns; using *they* instead of he/she to refer to non-binary people⁵⁸. In Norway, for instance, job titles are being changed into gender-neutral names. Two examples are 'rådmann' (Council Man, literal translation) as the Chief Municipal Executive and 'jordmor' (Earth Mother, literal translation), the equivalent of a midwife. Examples in English are changing from policeman to police officer, and from stewardess (or air hostess) to flight attendant.

There is one problem with changing labels like this, other than that it might cause confusion or resentment, and it might take a while to catch on (given that the proposal to change the label is legislated in the first place), and that is keeping lexical effects. Lexical effects are cognitive and non-cognitive effects that the concept has on people.⁵⁹ For example, there are reasons for keeping the lexical effects of MARRIAGE for people of the same sex that wants to get married. If a marriage between people of the same sex is called 'gay marriage', then this creation of a new concepts singles this group out, as if it is not as normal as traditional marriage. A

⁵⁸ Without getting into too much details about terminological improvement, there is an important distinction to make here between reasons for changing a term. By changing the term/pronoun, it indicates that it was actually *wrong* to say that his person was a man/woman, because this person is in fact non-binary. This is different in the covid variant case, where it is not necessarily wrong that the Alpha variant is the British variant, because we just named it the British variant for some reason (first indicated there), it is just that this label is misleading. But to call someone 'him' when this person is non-binary is not misleading, it is *false*.

⁵⁹ Cappelen, 2020a, p. 143.

clearer example, perhaps, is the lexical effects of *Coca Cola*. Are people drinking Coca Cola simply because of taste, or does the brand name Coca Cola matter? It is not difficult to imagine a scenario where Coca Cola lost/sold their rights to the name, but not their recipe. Many would continue to drink the *brand* Coca Cola simply because of the name, even though the taste and recipe is different. The lexical effects of the brand *Coca Cola* matter.

2.2 Conceptual Repair

We can distinguish between three ways of fixing a defective concept: removing, replacing or revising (RRR) the existing, or actual, concept. Let us go through them one by one.

Conceptual removal, sometimes called elimination or abandonment, is proposed when you want to get rid of a concept for some reason, and do not want any concept(s) to replace it with. Some examples from CE are proposals to remove the concepts of ART, ASSERTION, DEMOCRACY and RACE.⁶⁰ The general type of argument is that the concepts are so defective that we should just get rid of them. Cappelen argues, for example, that ASSERTION is a defective theoretical category, and should be ignored:

What philosophers have tried to capture by the term 'assertion' is largely a philosophers' invention. It fails to pick out an act-type that we engage in and it is not a category we need in order to explain any significant component of our linguistic practice."⁶¹

Another example is Appiah on the concept of RACE. He has proposed a few different accounts on the concept of RACE, and one of them is to try to remove the *concept* - not just the label 'race' - in an effort to remove racism.⁶² The argument is that, biologically speaking, RACE does not make sense, and the widespread view that humans can be grouped by their race is harmful.

Suggestions of removal are rare in CE, for one, because they seem difficult to implement. Appiah, for example, no longer proposes that we remove the concept of RACE, and the biggest proponent of removal (or abandonment, as he call it) is Cappelen. The rest who focus on conceptual repair turn to revision or replacement.

⁶⁰ Barring RACE, which is a proposal by Appiah (2018), all proposals are by Cappelen: ASSERTION (2011), ART (2021a) and DEMOCRACY (2021b).

⁶¹ Cappelen, 2020a, p. 139; 2010, p. 20.

⁶² Appiah (2018) has since remedied his approach, and currently wants to engineer RACE to a kind of racial identity. The example is simply meant as an illustration.

The details of revision and replacement are not always fleshed out, and the distinction can be hard to draw.⁶³ For clarity, I focus on meanings, specifically word-meaning pairs (which can constitute a concept), instead of concepts, more loosely. Allison Koslow on revision:

Paradigmatically, a conceptual engineer identifies a word—say, “woman”—that expresses a concept—woman—and proposes that we use the word to express a new but related concept in some area of discourse.⁶⁴

Koslow refers here to Haslanger’s proposal, which is that the word ‘woman’ should express $WOMAN_{NEW}$ and not $WOMAN_{OLD}$, where the difference is that *subordination* is included into the intension of $WOMAN_{NEW}$, which it is not in $WOMAN_{OLD}$.⁶⁵ At some point, however, the meaning of a concept becomes “so big” that it makes more sense to call it *conceptual replacement*, and not merely a conceptual revision. In fact, lacking relevant criteria, $WOMAN$ might be a case of conceptual replacement depending on how large you consider the change to be. According to Koslow, a conceptual replacement is one word-meaning pair being replaced by another word-meaning pair, but this is also what happens in conceptual revision.⁶⁶ The distinction between revision and replacement, as I see it, is merely a question of degree. Imagine a case where they changed the maximum amount of alcohol percentage in non-alcoholic beer from 0.05% to 0.06% (for whatever reason). I think we can safely call this a conceptual revision of $NON-ALCOHOLIC\ BEVERAGES$. If the change was from 0.05% to 5%, I think we could safely call this a conceptual replacement of $NON-ALCOHOLIC\ BEVERAGES$.⁶⁷

Regardless of it being revision or replacement, there are a few ways to go about this. The most famous method is Carnapian explication, generally considered a replacement project under the heading of CE.⁶⁸ Let us end this section by considering this method. Carnap developed a method of *explication* to remedy inexactness in language, to facilitate fruitful theories: “By the procedure of explication we mean the transformation of an inexact, prescientific concept, the

⁶³ Koslow (2022), for instance, on the distinction between revision and replacing, only writes that: “this distinction may be set aside for the purposes of this paper.” At least Koslow is explicit about it. The terms are thrown out as if it is obvious what is replacement and what is revision, but conceptual engineers disagree between themselves on what is what (for example, while Haslanger’s amelioration of $WOMAN$ is generally considered to be revision, Scharp (2020) calls it replacement).

⁶⁴ Koslow, 2022, p. 1. A theory can, of course, change if one of its main components (concepts) changes. The theory of phlogiston was abandoned because the concept of $PHLOGISTON$ did not carve nature by its joints, so to speak.

⁶⁵ Haslanger, 2000; 2012.

⁶⁶ Koslow, 2022, p. 4.

⁶⁷ Clarifying this distinction might seem unnecessary, but it is important for the challenge of topic discontinuity (see next chapter).

⁶⁸ See, for instance, Koch (2019), Pinder (2020) and Dutilh-Novaes (2020) for more on Carnapian explication.

explicandum, into a new exact concept, the explicatum.”⁶⁹ There are five requirements in place in order to achieve a successful explication: exactness, precision, fruitfulness, simplicity and similarity to the explicandum.⁷⁰ In contemporary Carnapian explication, the focus is mostly on fruitfulness. Carnap had a narrow notion of fruitfulness, and I think Pinder’s notion of fruitfulness is better suited for CE: “I thus use “fruitfulness” as a term-of-art that denotes whatever theorists ought to aim for when engineering their concepts ... [to facilitate] progress towards achieving relevant theoretical goals.”⁷¹ Some examples of explication are MASS, PLANET and FISH. Carnap on explicating FISH:

When we compare the explicandum Fish with the explicatum Piscis, we see that they do not even approximately coincide [...]. What was [the zoologists’] motive for [...] artificially constructing the new concept Piscis far remote from any concept in the prescientific language? The reason was that [they] realized the fact that the concept Piscis promised to be much more fruitful than any concept more similar to Fish. A scientific concept is the more fruitful the more it can be brought into connection with other concepts on the basis of observed facts; in other words, the more it can be used for the formulation of laws.⁷²

FISH was explicated to create a more fruitful concept for scientific purposes. Explication is a common method in scientific contexts, but so is conceptual innovation.

2.3 Conceptual Innovation

“The literature on conceptual engineering has focused largely, if not exclusively, on conceptual repair,” writes Simion and Kelp.⁷³ They believe that we should reorient the CE project from conceptual repair to *conceptual innovation*. All that is needed for successful amelioration is some kind of improvement, Simion and Kelp says, not the fixing of defects.⁷⁴ Amelioration literally means improvement, after all. The goal in conceptual innovation is to improve *the world of concepts*.⁷⁵ Instead of being bound to explain and outline what is defective about the concepts we got, we can simply imagine better/new ones.

⁶⁹ Carnap, 1962, p. 3.

⁷⁰ Carnap (1962, p. 5) only formulated four requirements for successful explication (*precision* is the novelty). Georg Brun (1222-3) shows, however, that we should distinguish *exactness* from *precision*: “[for] requiring that the explicatum is not more vague than the explicandum [...] I use “exact”, whereas “precise” is reserved for the precision and discriminating power of comparative and quantitative concepts.”

⁷¹ Pinder, 2020, p. 914-15.

⁷² Carnap (1962) as cited in Dutilh-Novaes (2020, p. 1015).

⁷³ Simion & Kelp, 2020, p. 987.

⁷⁴ Simion, 2018.

⁷⁵ Simion & Kelp, 2020, p. 988.

David Chalmers makes a similar distinction to conceptual repair and innovation. Taking the analogy of engineering quite seriously, he calls it *de novo* engineering and re-engineering: “De novo engineering is building a new bridge, program, concept, or whatever. Re-engineering is fixing or replacing an old bridge, program, concept, or whatever.”⁷⁶ Chalmers agrees with Simion and Kelp that re-engineering (conceptual repair) exhausts most of CE projects, and names TRUTH, BELIEF, WOMAN and RACE as examples. Examples Chalmers gives of *de novo* engineering (conceptual innovation) are: EPISTEMIC JUSTICE, SUPERVENIENCE, RIGID DESIGNATION and, indeed, *CONCEPTUAL ENGINEERING* in itself.⁷⁷ The point is that these concepts were not introduced with the purpose of fixing or replacing other concepts. SUPERVENIENCE, for example, was invented to capture a non-causal relation between properties.⁷⁸ The need for a concept like SUPERVENIENCE arrived because philosophers wanted to hold physicalism without holding identity theory.⁷⁹ SUPERVENIENCE is not, according to Chalmers, a replacement of IDENTITY because, “The concept of identity is doing fine. It’s just that there’s a job people were using identity for, in some reductive projects, that people then tried to use supervenience to do.”⁸⁰ NOR IS SUPERVENIENCE a replacement of ENTAILMENT, because A can supervene on B without being entailed by B. What is going on here is simply that philosophers are engaging in a particular philosophical problem, and introducing a new tool (concept) in order to theorize better. They are “supplying lacks”, as Quine would put it:

We do not claim to make clear and explicit what the users of the unclear expression had unconsciously in mind all along. We do not expose hidden meanings as the word [...] ‘explication’ would suggest; we supply lacks.⁸¹

There are three different ways to innovate concepts: invent, capture and repurpose. The first method, inventing a concept, means to introduce something novel that is not meant as a replacement for something. SUPERVENIENCE, as we just saw, is an example of such invention.

The second way to innovate concepts is to make a concept more readily available in thought; to capture a concept.⁸² Take SEXUAL HARASSMENT. A group of women at Cornell

⁷⁶ Chalmers, 2020, p. 6.

⁷⁷ Chalmers, 2020, p. 7.

⁷⁸ Jago, 2018.

⁷⁹ Identity theory holds that mental states in the brain are identical to physical states in the brain.

⁸⁰ Chalmers, 2020, p. 7.

⁸¹ Quine, 1960, p. 258 (§53).

⁸² Eklund, 2021b.

University coined the label in 1975. The introduction of the label does not entail, however, that the concept was not prevalent in some people's minds. One way to look at it is as follows: some people had the *concept* of SEXUAL HARASSMENT, but not a label for it.⁸³ This is an example of conceptual innovation because introducing the label 'sexual harassment' made the concept SEXUAL HARASSMENT more readily available in people's minds. The usefulness of this concept is quite clear: arguably, giving the concept a label has helped improve the lives of people that have been sexually harassed through identifying the phenomenon more easily, knowing that they were not alone, and that the people being harassed were victims, and not somehow to blame.

The third approach to innovating concepts is to use an old concept for a new purpose.⁸⁴ An example is how G.E.M. Anscombe's re-introduction of Aristotle's concept of being a VIRTUOUS PERSON brought a new light to ethical debate, changing the focus away from the *act* (consequentialism and deontology) and onto the *actor*.⁸⁵

Conceptual innovation is a relatively new approach in CE, but it is a very useful category because it helps to distinguish the creation of concepts that is not for the purpose of repairing concepts. Innovation is, in Quinean terms, to *supply lacks*. If a theory, like physicalism, is in need of a concept to avoid holding identity theory, then inventing SUPERVENIENCE to fill this gap is innovation. As Chalmers puts it, the spirit is "[b]uilding rather than fixing."⁸⁶

Chapter 3. Foundational Issues in Conceptual Engineering

According to Manuel Gustavo Isaac and Steffen Koch, there are four foundational issues in CE:

⁸³ This is not a clear-cut case, but most are not. Some people might not have had the concept of what was happening to them as being something wrong; harassment, while others might have had the concept of it being something wrong (as harassment) but either blaming themselves or normalizing it, etc. The idea is that, at least, some people had the concept in their minds without having a label for it.

⁸⁴ Eklund, 2021b.

⁸⁵ Anscombe, 1958.

⁸⁶ Chalmers, 2020, p. 7.

- (i) *Bootstrapping challenge*: What is it that conceptual engineers are ‘engineering’ and what does ‘engineering’ mean to begin with?
- (ii) *Challenge from topic discontinuity*: When engineering concepts, does that necessarily lead to a change of topic? If not, what separates good cases from bad ones?
- (iii) *[Feasibility] challenge*: How should one go about assessing old and designing new concepts? In particular: how can empirical methods be put to fruitful use here?
- (iv) *Implementation challenge*: To what extent is it even realistic to actually implement conceptual engineering proposals? What would be required for it to be feasible?⁸⁷

One remark before we go through these one by one. The feasibility challenge is only the third part of what Isaac and Koch calls the methodological challenge.⁸⁸ This is not to say that the first two parts are irrelevant. Quite the contrary. The first part of the challenge - *how should we go about designing new concepts?* - is the main question of Part I of this thesis. In the next chapter, I argue that we should be more moderate in our designs of concepts *because* of the foundational issues outlined here. The second part of the methodological challenge - *How should one go about assessing old [...] concepts?* - is the challenge that motivated Part II of this thesis, where I argue that we should focus on how concepts *function* when assessing concepts. Since these two aspects are so central to the thesis, and questions I hope to aid in, what remains to the third challenge is a question of feasibility.

Back to the challenges in front of us. The purpose of this chapter is not to assess these challenges, but simply to present, and clarify and revise where necessary.

3.1 The Bootstrapping Challenge

There are two parts to the bootstrapping challenge: (1) what are conceptual engineers engineering and (2) what does *engineering* mean to begin with? Put differently, the bootstrapping challenge is questions relating to the *name* and the method CE: is the target of engineering really *concepts*, and is *engineering* really the best name for this method? I do not consider the second of those questions important, and too much digital ink has already been spilled over it.⁸⁹ The only problem with the name ‘conceptual engineering’ is when philosophers take it too seriously, and commit the nominal fallacy of incorrectly assuming that what you call something will somehow

⁸⁷ Isaac & Koch (2022, p. 2). There are other challenges to CE, but these four do a fair job of summing up most of the challenges that CE faces.

⁸⁸ Isaac and Koch (2022, p. 2) use ‘challenges’, ‘issues’ and ‘problems’ interchangeably, which is a bit confusing, but should be unproblematic.

⁸⁹ See, for instance, Isaac (2020); Isaac & Koch (2022); Chalmers (2020).

elucidate its nature.⁹⁰ We should, in my opinion, view ‘conceptual engineering’ as an analogy: philosophers should use concepts as engineers use tools. As an analogy, ‘conceptual engineering’ seems apt because it promotes the view of concepts as something useful, as well as practical - something with clear utility rather than theoretical otherworldliness.

The first part of the bootstrapping challenge is more interesting, but, in my opinion, misnamed. I take the question, “What are conceptual engineers engineering?” to mean, what is the *subject matter* of CE? This is not a bootstrapping issue. Bootstrapping is to assume something for later on, which you are then going to call into question; you are relying on your own bootstraps. Ironically, it seems that Isaac and Koch violate the first part of the bootstrapping challenge misnaming something so that it becomes misleading.

The question of subject matter *is* very important. I will not go through all the options.⁹¹ Most conceptual engineers take *concepts* to be the subject matter. A remark by Cappelen is of relevance here:

There’s of course already a smorgasbord of options for how to think about concepts [...] However, and this is the strange part, those who talk of conceptual engineering as operating on concepts don’t start by making choices on this smorgasbord [...] That’s unfortunate because it makes the view hard to assess - you don’t really have an account of conceptual engineering unless you make an explicit choice here.⁹²

If you do choose concepts as subject matter, Cappelen gives you three options: (i) concepts are entities that fulfill functions; (ii) concepts are entities with constitutive principles (concepts are something we possess), and; (iii) concepts are entities that persist over time.⁹³ I revisit this choice in Part II, and I connect the problem of subject matter to a problem of conceptual revision/replacement in the next chapter. I also opine that the problem of subject matter is the main reason for the challenge from topic discontinuity.

⁹⁰ To various degrees, I believe both Chalmers and Isaac to commit this fallacy. Isaac (2020, p. 3): “This paper expressly assumes that conceptual engineering is about engineering concepts, in other words, that it is about engineering and about concepts.” Chalmers (2020) takes the engineering analogy too seriously, perhaps, when applying the same definition of engineering to that of CE.

⁹¹ Cappelen (2018, p. 3), for instance, takes ‘representational devices’ to be the subject matter of CE.

⁹² Cappelen, 2018, p. 141. Isaac (2020) and Fischer, p. 5 The reader might be thinking that the author of this thesis does not make a choice here, and the reader would be right. In the author's defense ([see the last chapter](#)): it doesn't really matter exactly *what* concepts are, as much as *how* we target concepts. It too, like much of CE, should be a normative inquiry.

⁹³ Cappelen, 2018, p. 141.

3.2 Challenge from Topic Discontinuity

Pluto was removed as a planet because similar celestial objects to Pluto were found in the vicinity of Neptune. Hypothetically, what if hundreds of celestial objects similar to small planets such as Mercury or Venus were discovered in our solar system? Would we find a way to exclude Mercury or Venus, or would we have to settle for hundreds of new planets in our solar system? The lingering worry that I am approaching is this: how much change is too much? How much can our conception of PLANET change before we are no longer talking about PLANET? Analogous to the Ship of Theseus Paradox, which questions whether an object can have all of its parts replaced but fundamentally remain the same object, how much change to the meaning of a concept can we make before it is no longer the same concept?

The risk of changing the topic instead of the concept is known in CE as *Strawson's Challenge*, named as such for P. F. Strawson's challenge against Carnap's explication of concepts.⁹⁴ The objection goes like this: If I ask you a question about F's, and you give me an answer that's not about F's but rather about G's, then you haven't answered my question. You have changed the topic.⁹⁵ Philosophers are trying to answer a question by replacing the concepts of which the questions are built upon. This, or so the challenge goes, will inevitably change the question because the conclusion is reached based on a set of premises that are no longer valid because of its own conclusion.⁹⁶ Consider Alexis Burgess: "We theorize with the concepts we have, not the ones we hope to have eventually, at some ideal limit of inquiry. That's true even when it comes to theorizing *about* our current concepts."⁹⁷ If we are trying to promote justice for WOMEN_{OLD}, but in doing so figure out a way to promote justice for WOMEN_{NEW}, what happens to WOMEN_{OLD}?⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Strawson, 1963.

⁹⁵ Sundell, 2020, p. 580.

⁹⁶ It is an ignoratio elenchi fallacy (missing the point): reaching an irrelevant conclusion based on an incorrect argument.

⁹⁷ Burgess (2020, p. 125) calls it *hypocrisy*, and admits to no defense other than shifting the burden of proof: it must be demonstrated that arguing hypocritically invalidates the method of CE.

⁹⁸ What happens, in this case, is social justice for females, but in other instances there might not be another concept (FEMALE) to lean on like this.

Conceptual engineers disagree about the seriousness of Strawson's Challenge.⁹⁹ Sally Haslanger is among those who take it seriously: "Revisionary projects are in danger of providing answers to questions that weren't being asked."¹⁰⁰ Matti Eklund, however, do not believe that we should worry much:

Whether it matters that the topic is changed depends on what our purposes are. If the concept revision is supposed to be justified by moral and political aims, then the chief question is whether those aims are better served by the new concept. If it is supposed to be justified by concerns about explanatory and predictive success then the chief question is whether the new concept better serves that aim. Change of topic is a bad thing exactly insofar as, among other purposes we do or should have, there is the purpose of saying something about the old topic. But why should that always be among our purposes? Maybe we are not answering the original questions asked. But maybe the old questions weren't the right ones to ask anyway.¹⁰¹

In short, Eklund's solution to the risk of changing the topic is: so what? As long as we have made some kind of improvement, what does it matter that we change the topic and not the concept? I agree. There is, however, one important reason for keeping the concept: preserving the *sameness of topic*, which is the idea that we can talk about the same topic even when changing the concept. We can still talk meaningfully about whaling and Moby Dick even though our conception of WHALE has changed (from being a fish to a mammal). Preserving the sameness of topic is important, for one, to avoid verbal disputes.

A dispute is merely verbal when there is no *actual* disagreement; the disputants simply talk past each other.¹⁰² Sometimes it might be enough to clarify what the verbal dispute consists of, and perhaps the disputants can reach an agreement on what they take the concept to mean. Other times such a clarification is difficult because the concepts involved might be complex, vague or even inconsistent (not to include the stubbornness of people), and more extreme measures need to be taken. With CE, we have such a measure to fix the vagueness or inconsistencies. Verbal dispute is one of the problems that CE hopes to solve: let us figure out what the concepts should mean, so that we can discuss the problems using the same language. Moreover, according to Chalmers, verbal disputes are one of the biggest sources of

⁹⁹ Cappelen and Haslanger (2000, p. 34), for instance, take it seriously, while Eklund and Thomasson do not. In short, this is Cappelen (2018, p. 101) proposal to solve the problem: "[...] topics are more coarse-grained than extensions and intensions, and so expressions that differ with respect to extensions and intensions can be about the same topic."

¹⁰⁰ Haslanger, 2000, p. 34.

¹⁰¹ Eklund, 2021a, p. 9.

¹⁰² Chalmers, 2011.

"disagreement" in the history of philosophy, effectively calling most of philosophy infeasible, if not pointless.¹⁰³

3.3 The Feasibility Challenge

The question of feasibility is whether CE can be put into practice, while the question of implementation is whether suggestions to change concepts can be *implemented* into the world. Isaac and Koch distinguish between the feasibility and the implementation challenge, while Koslow conflates the two.¹⁰⁴ As presented, I agree with Koslow, and struggle to see the difference. I think, however, that a fruitful distinction can be made by making feasibility a specific problem *of* the implementation challenge:

The implementation challenge: being unable to make changes to the (meaning of) concepts that conceptual engineers are proposing.¹⁰⁵

The feasibility problem: not including relevant scientific research when trying to implement proposals to change the (meaning of) concepts.

The following quote by Koslow sums up the motivation behind feasibility:

Questions about the feasibility of conceptual revision are like questions about whether a particular product will succeed in a new market, or whether a nonnative species will thrive in our ecosystem. We can study the likelihood of one expression becoming more popular than another in an area of discourse, rather like we can study the likelihood of one frog species outcompeting another in an area of the rainforest.¹⁰⁶

With the distinction and motivation in mind, we can move on to the specifics of the feasibility problem. There is a lot of empirical research, especially from cognitive psychology and (psycho-)linguistics - on the psychological nature of concepts, conceptual frameworks, conceptual competence, etc. semantic drift - far too much to cover here. I draw on Edouard Machery, Koslow and Eugen Fischer who specifically questions the feasibility for CE, and make some additions myself towards the end of the section.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Chalmers, 2011, p. 564

¹⁰⁴ Koslow, 2021, p. 2. According to Koch & Isaac (2020, p. 5) feasibility are practical questions of “whether and how conceptual engineering can be put into practice. Unlike abstract, metasemantic approaches to the so-called implementation challenge to conceptual engineering.” This distinction is unclear to me.

¹⁰⁵ Jorem, 2021, p. 186.

¹⁰⁶ Koslow, 2022, p. 2.

¹⁰⁷ Koslow, 2021; Machery, 2021.

The first part of the feasibility challenge, as presented by Machery, is the attractor challenge. Empirical research suggests that concepts have a particular psychological nature as *attractors*: the mind is drawn to think with these concepts, and therefore efforts to replace these concepts are unlikely to succeed.¹⁰⁸

When a folk concept is an attractor, the explicated concept is unlikely to be used in the contexts where it is supposed to be used. So, the issue is not that we cannot engineer new concepts; rather the issue is that the engineered concepts are likely to remain otiose, and that instead of the engineered concepts the lay concept will remain the effective concept.¹⁰⁹

The worry is that when a concept is engineered, and even implemented, the implementation will not take effect. Consider when Asperger's Syndrome were removed from the DSM manual, and people previously diagnosed as having this syndrome were included into the autism spectrum (a change in the extension of AUTISM). This has not stopped people either identifying as having Asperger's, nor talking about Asperger's even though, technically speaking, there is no such thing as having Asperger's. ASPERGER'S SYNDROME is an attractor concept, and remains the effective concept. There are no problems, however, with people identifying as having Asperger's.¹¹⁰ The important point is that psychologists adopt the changes.

The second part of the feasibility challenge, as presented by Koslow, is the problem with achieving meaning change. Koslow presents four problems under this category.¹¹¹ First, once there is a word-meaning pair that is in stable use, a homonym is unlikely to replace it (in large part, because of the attractor challenge above, and the problem of conceptual competence below).¹¹² Second, meanings have a tendency to *persist* even when the words used to express them perish. For example, even if we stopped using the expression, "You're such a girl," the connection between being cowardly and a girl might not go away. Because it seems to me that if we do actually achieve to completely abandon any talk about the connection coward-girl, then it seems reasonable to suggest that we would not make this connection anymore (unless there is an a priori, innate, intuition about this connection, which seems absurd.) Third, research shows that

¹⁰⁸ Machery, 2021, p. 2.

¹⁰⁹ Machery, 2021, p. 17.

¹¹⁰ I say no problem, but this is not entirely true. People who have been diagnosed in the past as having Asperger's were automatically included into the autism spectrum, while people who would have been diagnosed with Asperger's today do not necessarily qualify as having autism, and therefore receive no diagnosis nor benefits.

¹¹¹ Koslow, 2022, p. 12-18.

¹¹² A homonym is a word having several meanings. For example, cool (both describing something awesome and something cold, depending on context).

people tend to avoid loaded words.¹¹³ For example, people are not likely to adopt a suggestion to engineer the label ‘meat’ to, for example, ‘murdered animals’ in order to get people to eat less murdered animals. Fourth, there is a problem of *opacity*: when engineering a concept, say *DISABILITY* (removing the “dis” from disability¹¹⁴), the proposal is (often) too technical for ordinary discourse, and even though the concept might be adopted in some circles, like analytic philosophy, it is unlikely to predominate theoretical discourse about disability.

The third part to the feasibility problem is Fischer’s contribution, and the problem is something like this: conceptual engineers want to improve concepts in order to help us reason better, but to what extent can competent thinkers be able to reason with these new meanings of familiar words?¹¹⁵ There seems to be an assumption, in CE, that people possess a great deal of conceptual control, something psycholinguistic research seems to dispute. The research alluded to is, for example, on the *salience bias*: people have a tendency to focus on information that grabs our attention, which is a function of exposure frequency. People will tend to keep the meaning of a word that they are used to instead of the new meaning.¹¹⁶ I think there are many other examples, and just to mention one, there is the *mere exposure effect*, which is a phenomenon that “preference can be formed without an accompanying awareness of the preference formation process.”¹¹⁷ People are perhaps not in as much control as they think.¹¹⁸

I want to add some general remarks on conceptual frameworks: a map of concepts and their relationships.¹¹⁹ A conceptual framework is almost like Quine’s metaphor of the web of belief, that comprises our overall theory of the world.¹²⁰ When we think, we have a frame of reference: “[A] set of assumptions or criteria by which a person or group judges ideas, actions and experiences.”¹²¹ This frame of reference can change based on information and experience. Our thinking is, in a sense, defined (or limited) by the framework that we have. It is the same with fields, movements and theories. A theoretical field, for example, has its framework that is part of what establishes it as a theoretical field. Kuhn’s paradigm shift is an example of a

¹¹³ Koslow, 2022, p. 15-16.

¹¹⁴ A proposal by Barnes (2016).

¹¹⁵ Fischer, 2020, p. 1.

¹¹⁶ Fischer, 2020, p. 12-15.

¹¹⁷ C.f. Bornstein (Janiszewski, 1993, p. 376).

¹¹⁸ Conceptual competence might also affect the first and last point by Koslow: a homonym is not likely to replace a word-meaning pair, in part, because people lack conceptual competence, and the same for the problem of *opacity*.

¹¹⁹ I use conceptual framework and conceptual scheme interchangeably, as it, in this context, refers to the same.

¹²⁰ Carlson, 2015.

¹²¹ APA, 2022.

fundamental change in a specific conceptual framework.¹²² I think it should be one of the main goals of CE to expand on these frameworks - for individuals, groups, theories, fields, and movements - but instead conceptual engineers tend to focus on *individual* concepts. It barely makes sense to talk about concepts outside of the context in which they are used in a broader conceptual framework. This is why *word association* works: finding patterns with words linked together.¹²³ CE is clustered with attempts of trying to repair *individual* concepts, as if they work in a vacuum.¹²⁴ Concepts do not operate in a vacuum. Concepts are defined by other concepts. The problem is that CE projects tend to focus on fixing one concept at a time, almost as a homage to piecemeal science, when this is not what science does.

The Duhem-Quine Problem, in science, states that it is impossible to test a hypothesis in isolation because an empirical testing of the hypothesis requires one or more background assumptions.¹²⁵ A hypothesis can neither be supported nor falsified on its own. It seems plausible to extend the Duhem-Quine Problem from hypotheses to concepts since we evaluate a concept conjoined with many other concepts that play a role within the conceptual framework that we are using to make predictions and have successful beliefs.

One aspect of the Duhem-Quine Problem is what Patrick Greenough calls the Omnicide Problem: assuming successful replacement or revision of a concept, this “new” concept will affect many nearby concepts.¹²⁶ Greenough presented this as a challenge, or criticism, to Scharp’s replacement of TRUTH. Scharp quickly dismissed the problem in a reply to Greenough, but has since repented, and is currently working on an answer.¹²⁷

The purpose here has not been to exhaust the empirical research on concepts and conceptual frameworks, but rather to scratch the surface and demonstrate that CE seems to face some problems of feasibility, which both questions and might hinder the likelihood of implementing their proposals to change the meaning of words and concepts.

3.4 The Implementation Challenge

¹²² Kuhn, 1962/96.

¹²³ Jung, 1910.

¹²⁴ See, for instance, Scharp (2013); Haslanger (2000, 2012); Cappelen (2021a; 2021c).

¹²⁵ Stanford, 2021.

¹²⁶ Greenough, 2019.

¹²⁷ Scharp (2019; 2021).

The implementation challenge is that conceptual engineers seem unable to make the changes (to the meaning of concepts) that they want to make.¹²⁸ Suggestions to improve concepts is fine, but there isn't much point to it if no one is going to listen; if no one is going to use your proposal. It is a problem of enforcing changes to our conceptual schemes. Compare it to proposing a new law in the US. First, you draft a bill. A bill is a proposal for a new law, or a proposal to change an existing law. In CE, this would be a proposal to establish a new concept or to change an existing concept. This is amelioration. Then, you have to convince someone to sponsor the bill. In CE, this could be other philosophers endorsing your proposal, citing your article, etc. Subsequently, there are *eight* steps that the bill has to go through (The House/Senate, committee, subcommittee, committee again, Full Chamber, Senate/House, President, Congress). The process of conceptual change is mostly invisible, and perhaps even more complicated and convoluted.¹²⁹ In addition, even if the conceptual change actually wins through, there is often no law to prohibit it, and the change(s) might easily dissipate.

Implementation is a question of stipulation. Consider Alice, in Wonderland:

‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master — that’s all.’¹³⁰

What Alice is wondering is whether the meanings of terms and concepts can be stipulated? There are two important follow-up questions: who is doing the stipulation, and who are the recipients of the stipulation? The *who* of the first question are usually the ones who give the proposal, but I say more about this in the next chapter. The *who* of the second question is either individuals, groups or everyone. For individuals, Pinder has an interesting account of changing speaker-meaning (what a speaker means when she utters a word), as a very minimum for CE.¹³¹ Although changing individual linguistic behavior like this is interesting, I think that, for the most part, CE projects aim to change collective linguistic behavior.¹³²

¹²⁸ Jorem, 2021, p. 186. The implementation challenge was formulated in Cappelen & Plunkett (2020), but already noted by Burgess & Plunkett (2013a; 2013b) and Cappelen (2018).

¹²⁹ Some argue that we have virtually no control over conceptual change at all (Cappelen, 2018, p. 72-73).

¹³⁰ From Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, as cited in Fischer (2020, p. 1).

¹³¹ Pinder, 2021.

¹³² Koslow, 2021, p. 2.

Matti Eklund distinguishes between *retail* and *wholesale*: “Is the conceptual replacement or revision supposed to be retail - the proposal concerns only some uses of the concept - or wholesale - concerns all uses of the concept?”¹³³ Haslanger’s proposal to change the concept WOMAN is wholesale, because she wants it to concern all uses of WOMAN. Contrarily, Scharp’s revision of TRUTH, for example, is retail because Scharp is only proposing to replace TRUTH in certain theoretical contexts. It should come as no surprise that it is easier to implement a change to a concept within a small context, as opposed to changing a concept across all contexts. For this reason, a proposal to change TRUTH has a better chance of getting implemented than the proposal to change WOMAN.

The implementation challenge is of most concern with regards to conceptual repair, and not conceptual innovation.¹³⁴ Conceptual engineers are well aware of this challenge and are working on overcoming it.¹³⁵ It is perhaps a tautology that, “In science the credit goes to the man who convinces the world, not to whom the idea occurred first.”¹³⁶

¹³³ Eklund, 2021a, p. 17.

¹³⁴ I follow the remarks here by Deutsch (2021), and specifically Koch (2021, p. 228): “[s]tipulation has the power to create new semantic meanings if the term in question does not have a fixed semantic meaning already. So again, there is no implementation challenge to conceptual construction.”

¹³⁵ See, for instance, Jorem, 2021; Queloz & Bieber, 2021; Thomasson, 2021.

¹³⁶ C.f. Sir Francis Darwin (Strauss, 1966).

Chapter 4. Better for What? Towards Fabianism

From the first two chapters we have seen that CE is fundamentally about improving our (world of) concepts using three general methods with three generic goals: Conceptual innovation is about making our conceptual schemes *better*. Conceptual repair is about making our concepts *better*. Terminological improvement is about making our word-meaning pairs *better*. As an effect of the *italics*, the question that should jump out of the screen/paper is: *better for what?* This is a simple question that, firstly, should be asked more often in the field of CE, secondly, should have an apparent answer in each case, and, thirdly, should guide the suggestions/tactics of making improvements to (the meaning) of concepts. Generally, in science and mathematics, for example, scientists and mathematicians do not improve or construct concepts with a vague notion that this might somehow improve discourse. No, they have a purpose behind the improvement or construction. Their goals are apparent, and so are the tactics for achieving those goals.

Tactics = specific objectives with each engineering project.

Goals = overall objectives of the engineering project(s).

In this chapter, I argue that it is important for CE projects to have apparent goals, and a useful, realistic tactic to achieve those goals. There has been a tendency to have vague goals and quixotic tactics, but the purpose of this chapter is less a criticism of what *has been*, and more of an argument for what *should be*. Nevertheless, I start with a case that suffers from quixotic tactics: Haslanger's proposal to ameliorate WOMAN.¹³⁷ This case will showcase how CE projects are vulnerable to the foundational issues, focusing on three overestimations:

- (i) expecting too much from concepts
- (ii) engineering all uses of concepts (wholesale)
- (iii) extensive meaning change¹³⁸

I propose that CE projects will be less vulnerable to the foundational issues if they remedy these overestimations, by, respectively:

¹³⁷ I use Haslanger's early proposal to ameliorate WOMAN (2000 and 2006) merely as an illustration. Haslanger has since admitted that the proposal was mistaken (2020, 2022).

¹³⁸ (i) is a feasibility issue, while (ii) and (iii) are issues specifically related to implementation.

- (a) viewing concepts as embedded in frameworks (embeddedness)
- (b) engineering only one or some uses of concepts (retail)
- (c) non-extensive meaning change

I argue that the four foundational issues of CE are less of a threat if we make moderate changes (c) to a specific use of a concept (b) for the purpose of aiding a framework (a).

I begin by demonstrating that Haslanger's suggestion to ameliorate the concept of *WOMAN* is vulnerable to the challenges posed by the foundational issues in CE. In Section 2, I focus on the three overestimations and their three remedies, introducing what I call Fabianism.

4.1 No More Women - A Utopia?

For Haslanger, no more women would constitute something like a utopia, in the sense of an ideal society. I think it is the other sense of utopian: quixotic. There are not necessarily any problems in having ambitious *goals* in CE, in my opinion, the problem arises when the tactics are also overambitious/quixotic.

As a reminder, Haslanger proposes to change the intension of *WOMAN*; to include *subordination* into the definition of the term.¹³⁹ The paradoxical dream is to have *no more women* because then there would be no more subordination of *females*. There are many reasons behind Haslanger's proposal, most of them political. The reasons, or even legitimacy of the proposal, is of less importance for our purposes, since it is the goal and the tactics (and the relation between them) that are under scrutiny here.

Haslanger's tactic: include subordination into the intension of *WOMAN*.

Haslanger's primary goal: gender equality.

The goal of gender equality is not being criticized here. What is criticized is the tactics used to achieve this goal. The tactic of including subordination into the intension of *WOMAN* is not a good way to achieve the goal of gender equality because the proposal is, to various degrees, vulnerable to the foundational issues. Let us consider how Haslanger's proposal stacks up to the four issues.

The bootstrapping challenge is about what exactly it is that conceptual engineers are engineering. For this case, a better question is perhaps: what is Haslanger attempting to ameliorate, i.e. improve? Haslanger is not really attempting to ameliorate the *concept* of *WOMAN*,

¹³⁹ Haslanger, 2000; 2012.

as I see it, Haslanger is *using* the concept of WOMAN as a means to an end to make conditions better for *women*. Haslanger is trying to ameliorate the lives of women.¹⁴⁰ The bootstrapping challenge for Haslanger's amelioration of WOMAN does raise an interesting question of what is proposed being changed, but the proposal does not necessarily rely on its own bootstraps.¹⁴¹

The challenge of topic discontinuity is slightly more relevant for Haslanger's proposal. Conceptual engineers disagree about whether the amelioration of WOMAN is a replacement or a revision of the concept: how big is the meaning change?¹⁴² If it is a replacement of the concept, then there will be a challenge of topic discontinuity, because we are using 'woman' to designate a new concept WOMAN_{NEW}, instead of WOMAN_{OLD}. Imagine that Haslanger's proposal gets implemented. We are now using the term 'woman' to designate females who *are* subordinated. What happens to females who are *not* subordinated (given that some are not)? Promoting social justice is presumably important for this group as well. Haslanger started the project by promoting justice towards women but ending up promoting justice for females. Haslanger has seemingly changed the topic.

The answer to the challenge of topic continuity probably lies in the differentiating between GENDER and SEX. We can still talk about WOMAN_{OLD} because we have the concept of FEMALE, but we might not always be so lucky, and have a replacement concept at hand. Furthermore, why does it matter that the questions were asked about women, but answered about females? In the spirit of Eklund, what does it matter if the topic is changed as long as there has been some sort of improvement? The challenge of topic continuity *and* of bootstrapping do not seem that pressing, but the remaining two issues make up for it.

The feasibility problems of focus here are the attractor challenge, an overestimation of conceptual competence and empirical problems of achieving meaning change. To various degrees, Haslanger's proposal is vulnerable to all of them. First, WOMAN is arguably an attractor concept. People are used to the categorization between men and women, and many seem unable or unwilling to comprehend that some people do not identify as binary. The mind is drawn to

¹⁴⁰ An argument can be made here that Haslanger is trying to ameliorate the concept of GENDER by changing the concept of WOMAN. There are, at least, two questions to answer if this is the case. First, as previously mentioned, what does it mean for females who are *not* subordinated - what gender is this group? Second, and perhaps most pressing, what about non-binary people? GENDER is becoming a difficult concept to grasp - a contested concept, to use Gallie's terminology, and it is unclear how WOMAN_{NEW} makes our conceptual schemes better.

¹⁴¹ I include the pressing problem of subject matter below. As previously stated, I do not view the problem of subject matter as a bootstrapping issue.

¹⁴² See, for instance, Scharp (2020, p. 406-7).

think with $WOMAN_{OLD}$, and therefore replacing it is unlikely. Even if such a suggestion would be implemented, the folk concept $WOMAN_{OLD}$ would remain the effective concept, effectively working against Haslanger's goal of gender equality.

The second part of the problem of feasibility, problems of achieving meaning change, contains four aspects of its own. Firstly, a homonym is unlikely to replace a stable word-meaning pair. 'Woman' is a familiar word with a familiar meaning, and so changing the meaning but keeping the word is unlikely, for reasons of attraction and conceptual competence. Secondly, given that the new meaning of $WOMAN$ would be implemented, the old meaning would still persist even if the word for it has changed. Thirdly, people have a tendency to avoid loaded words. It is not the word that is changing in Haslanger's proposal, but the meaning of the word (the concept). The new meaning is, however, more loaded than the old meaning, and so we could think that since the new meaning is more loaded people will avoid it. Fourthly, there is a problem of opacity: the new meaning of $WOMAN$ is too technical for most people to understand, and so it is unlikely to dominate outside of a certain circle (like CE or analytic philosophy).

The third part of the problems of feasibility are problems of conceptual competence. While the salience bias might not be attributed to this case, I believe the mere exposure effect can.¹⁴³ Proposals, like Haslanger's, are not getting enough exposure for people to adopt it.¹⁴⁴ It is questionable, however, to rely on the mere exposure effect in order to convince people to adopt a new concept. I suspect conceptual engineers want people to make their own choices, instead of through repetitive, or perhaps subliminal, messaging. The case of propaganda, though, is more relevant for questions of implementation.

Haslanger's proposal to ameliorate $WOMAN$ has a low chance of implementation, in large part, because the project seems infeasible. There are, however, three additional reasons for why Haslanger's proposal has a low chance of getting implemented, and these are also the overestimations that I suggest that conceptual engineers should remedy in the hope of implementing their proposals and making them feasible.¹⁴⁵ Combined, this makes up Fabianism.

¹⁴³ As a reminder, the mere exposure effect is that preference can be formed unconsciously. There are probably more biases and heuristics that are relevant.

¹⁴⁴ Actually, Haslanger's project might be the exception to CE projects here, as it has received a lot of exposure.

¹⁴⁵ Technically, two of the three overestimations have to do with feasibility, and so are not "additional" reasons.

4.2 Fabianism

I want to focus on three reasons for why implementation is unlikely, specifically for Haslanger's proposal, but also for CE projects in general: (i) the proposal expects too much work from a single concept; (ii) the proposal concerns all uses of the concept WOMAN (wholesale), and; (iii) the proposal is an extensive change to the meaning of WOMAN (extensive meaning change). I propose to remedy these concerns, respectively, through primarily viewing concepts as embedded in frameworks (embeddedness), engineering only some uses of concepts (retail), and make less severe changes to concepts (non-extensive meaning change). I consider the overestimations, and their respective remedy, together. This constitutes the first three subsections. I end with some upshots and implications of adopting Fabianism.

4.2.1 Concept embeddedness

CE is basically improving our concepts with a certain goal in mind. The most notable goal, as in Haslanger's case, is to *solve problems*. The best way to solve problems, for philosophers, however, is with *theories*, not with concepts. Conceptual engineers overestimate the role of concepts and expect too much from them. Concepts are general ideas, they are abstract, often unorganized and have a low explanatory- and predictive value. Theories are collections of explanations, specific (often represented by a model) organized and have a high explanatory value. In addition, they are more easily changed - not having to deal with the implementation challenge in the same way as concepts. We cannot expect the same explanatory- and predictive power in concepts as we do with theories. Therefore, conceptual engineers should often view concepts as embedded in theories. But if this was the only approach, it would marginalize many of the goals in CE. I think, therefore, that we need to broaden the *embeddedness* to something like conceptual frameworks - as argued for in Section 3.3.

On the analogy of engineering, fixing concepts are usually fixing some smaller parts of a big machine like an airplane, and not the whole part of a small machine like a unicycle. The point is that there usually is, or at least should be, a purpose to the fixing. We do not fix concepts in isolation from other concepts (the Duhem-Quine thesis). I suggest that there are predominantly three contexts within which a philosopher becomes interested in fixing a concept: (I) how the concept functions within a theory, (II) how the concept functions with regard to its neighboring

concepts, and (III) how the concept functions within a broader picture, like a framework, (philosophical) field and/or movement.¹⁴⁶ Consider this case to illustrate all three.

Imagine a philosopher called David who wants to solve the hard problem of consciousness: explaining the relationship between physical phenomena, such as brain processes, and experience/consciousness.¹⁴⁷ David has started getting into panpsychism, which is (crudely put) the view that all things have a mind/consciousness or a mind/conscious-like quality.¹⁴⁸ This does not mean that, for example, the Statue of David has a mind, but that some fundamental physical entities (something like quarks or neutrons) have mental states. Panpsychism seems to solve the hard problem of consciousness: if everything is conscious, then the gap between the physical and mental is closed (because everything is mental).

What concept of CONSCIOUSNESS is David applying here? Does it include awareness, feelings or unique thoughts? It doesn't seem like these attributes could be attributed to quarks. CONSCIOUSNESS needs to be much more primitive. Within the (revived) theory of consciousness, panpsychism, it seems that we need to revise how the concept of CONSCIOUSNESS is usually applied. In this case, David is interested in revising the concept because of a theory (I).

If we revise the concept CONSCIOUSNESS to something more primitive - call it CONSCIOUSNESS_{PRIM} - what happens to its neighboring concepts like AWARENESS, EMERGENCE, MIND and SUPERVENIENCE? Changing such an important concept is bound to infect other concepts that play a role within the same theory.¹⁴⁹ What is the relation, for example, between CONSCIOUSNESS_{PRIM} and AWARENESS? If awareness is no longer an important part of consciousness, what is it? What role does awareness play within this new framework? AWARENESS could, perhaps, replace the role that CONSCIOUSNESS had in a theory of human exceptionalism (since all animals are in the extension of CONSCIOUSNESS_{PRIM}). In these cases, David is interested in how concepts function in relation to other concepts (II).

If panpsychism is the most promising method for solving the hard problem of consciousness, and the concept of CONSCIOUSNESS is reduced to a primitive mental state, how does this affect other problems and theories within philosophy of mind (III)? On the flipside: what happens to other theories and problems if we apply this new concept of CONSCIOUSNESS_{PRIM}?

¹⁴⁶ I won't focus on (activist) movements here. Haslanger's amelioration of WOMAN could be viewed in the context of an activist feminist movement and/or within feminist theory.

¹⁴⁷ Chalmers, 2007, p. 226.

¹⁴⁸ Chalmers, 2015, p. 1.

¹⁴⁹ This is the Omnicide Problem, described in Chapter 3.

David could apply $CONSCIOUSNESS_{PRIM}$, for example, to try and solve the incompatibility between determinism and free will. The new concept could also help in another area of philosophy, for example, to help the argument of equaling human rights with animal rights. In these cases, David is interested in how a concept functions within a framework or field. If we view concepts as doing a job for either a theory, framework or movement then it is easier to fix them accordingly.

Alejandro Pérez Carballo makes a similar point of how concepts can aid science:

[...] it seems uncontroversial that scientific progress often involves introducing new conceptual tools. And this suggests that scientific progress sometimes involves conceptual progress - that better science incorporate better concepts.¹⁵⁰

I believe that aiding a conceptual framework can help, not just in the sciences, but in philosophy as well. Conceptual engineers fix concepts in isolation and expect that concepts should do all the work, when this is not what concepts are known for. Concepts are best as tools to aid a framework.¹⁵¹

4.2.2 Retail, not wholesale

When an engineering project is retail, it only concerns some uses of the concepts, but when wholesale, it contains *all* uses of the concept.¹⁵² Elimination projects are often wholesale, like eliminating *RACE* to remove racism (Appiah), or elimination of *ART* and *DEMOCRACY* (Cappelen). The last two proposals are recent, but there is little reason to see how they will succeed in being implemented.¹⁵³ Haslanger's proposal to change the concept *WOMAN* is wholesale, because she wants it to cover all uses of *WOMAN*. As far as I am aware, however, there has not been any case of successfully changing a concept in a democratic society by political means, essentially making Haslanger's project futile. Even if there has been the odd case, I would not think that they have been top-down, but rather as the effects of a social movement, like *MARRIAGE*. Even the changes to gendered languages are caused by social movements. There was not a philosopher or politician who said: let us start using these gender-neutral names. No, it started with

¹⁵⁰ Carballo, 2020, p. 304.

¹⁵¹ As with the explication of *FISH* to make a more exact and fruitful concepts in the framework of biology.

¹⁵² Eklund, 2021a, p. 17.

¹⁵³ In Cappelen's defense, he proposes eliminating these concepts *individually*, although I am uncertain what that will accomplish.

disgruntlement with individuals or groups, for example not identifying as binary or not wanting masculine jobs to have male names, as in Policeman, when women are policemen too.

I think, perhaps, a middle-way can be found. At some point we arrive at a *choice point*, the point where a decision needs to be made.¹⁵⁴ The International Astronomical Union arrived at a point of pressure where new findings called the old conception of PLANET into question, and that a choice needed to be made to continue with a better framework of our solar system. The same can, perhaps, be said about social movements and making changes to concepts. Like empirical findings, the pressure from social movements - combined with a theory/affirmation that the cause of the movement is well-founded, which of course can be difficult - we can say that we have arrived at a choice-point when it comes to gendered languages and non-binary gendering of people.

Perhaps eliminating slurs and epithets are examples of wholesale, but there aren't many examples, especially not successful ones. I would suggest that retail and wholesale are viewed more as a continuum. Even though Scharp's proposal to change TRUTH can be regarded as retail, the theoretical contexts are quite broad, including logic, philosophy of language and linguistics. A more localist change would have an even better chance of getting implemented. Furthermore, the fact is, few (if any) have adopted Scharp's proposal. One reason for this is that it still concerns several uses of the concept, but another problem is that Scharp is making a big change to the meaning of the concept TRUTH; so extensive that he is replacing it.

4.2.3 (Non)Extensive meaning change

Another aspect that will affect the likelihood of implementation and the feasibility of a proposal is *how extensive is the meaning change?*¹⁵⁵ As the scope has to do with different uses of the concept across contexts, the extensiveness has to do with different uses of the concept *within* the same context. Questions of how extensive meaning change is are difficult, however, because they are questions of degree. As with the question of changing the concept or the topic, how similar is similar enough? How many parts of the Ship of Theseus does the ship still have to have in order to be the same ship? How many grains of sand form a heap?¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Pinder, 2022, p. 18.

¹⁵⁵ There is no meaning change in terminological repair and conceptual innovation, and so we are concerned with conceptual repair.

¹⁵⁶ The sorites paradox.

We do have, however, some pegs to pin the question on: removal, replacement and revision. Creating a simplified picture, we can say that removal and replacement of concepts are examples of *extensive* meaning change, while revision is an example of moderate meaning change.¹⁵⁷ The problem of this simplification is that it seems we have only moved the problem of similarity down a chain. The question of *subject matter*; of where to strike the identity conditions of a concept remains. I can only give an unsatisfactory answer to this: how severe the meaning change is, will have to be determined case by case. The amelioration of WOMAN is arguably an extensive meaning change because the proposal (1) excludes a big group of people: females who are not subordinated, and (2) adds a substantial part to what it is to be a woman, that has previously not been a *part* of being a woman, but rather something that women has had to deal with. The replacement of TRUTH is arguably an extensive change to the meaning of the concept because Scharp replaces one concept with *two* concepts. This is an example of replacement because we have ended up with a different number of concepts than we began with.

Deciding case-by-case is not a lot to go on, and the cases above are not even conclusive. If, however, conceptual engineers figure out what the subject matter is (be it concepts or otherwise), there are reasons to believe that it will be easier to distinguish between extensive changes to the meaning from non-extensive ones. If concepts are chosen as the subject matter, and conceptual engineers work out a fully worked out account of the individuation of concepts, then not only will it be easier to determine whether the meaning change is extensive, it will also be easier to determine whether there has been a change of topic.

4.2.4 Adopting Fabianism

Conceptual engineers have sometimes been criticized as “tinkering” of “fiddling” with concepts, i.e., attempting repair in an aimless, casual way.¹⁵⁸ If we remove the aimlessness and casualness, however, tinkering is exactly what I am suggesting.¹⁵⁹ Consider: you want to achieve the goal of gender equality. What is the best approach to get those changes in place? Is it to propose revolutionary suggestions in their full splendor or is it to try to make minor, less controversial changes that will gradually take us closer to gender equality? Perhaps changing the narrative around gender concepts, and changing gendered occupations. Consider, therefore, the analogy of

¹⁵⁷ This is why I focused on the difference between revision and replacement in section 2.2.

¹⁵⁸ For example by Deutsch (2020).

¹⁵⁹ Appiah (2022) suggests a similar approach.

Fabianism. Fabianism is advancing democratic principles via gradualist and reformist efforts, rather than revolutionary ones. Fabianism got its name from the general who beat the stronger force of Hannibal by not attacking him head on, but with a more patient and elusive tactic. This path will take longer, but sometimes taking the long route is the better option. There are two reasons for this. First, the aforementioned implementation challenge. The crazier or more grandiose your proposal is, the less likely people are going to take the suggestion seriously. Second, and relatedly, to implement your suggestions you have to engage in a conceptual/social negotiation with your peers.¹⁶⁰ A proposal includes trial and error, redesigning and cooperation with other academics.

Fabianism holds, then, that conceptual engineers should have apparent goals, and realistic tactics when engineering concepts to achieve those goals. Fabianism is to take the foundational issues seriously and try to enforce actual changes to concepts. To do so, we must focus on retail, non-extensive changes to aid a framework. Fabianism is feasible and faces much less of an implementation challenge because non-extensive changes are made within a certain context. If we should take the challenge from topic discontinuity seriously, adopting Fabianism would remedy this challenge, because it encourages making moderate changes for particular purposes to aid a theory or a framework.

I end with the notion of apparent goals, a notion I have not spent much time on. The idea here is not that conceptual engineers, like scientists, need to have the goals explicitly set. The idea is simply that when we ask ourselves what the goal of the project is, it should be apparent.¹⁶¹ If we know the goal(s), it is easier to decide whether the tactics to achieve that goal are reasonable ones. Here are two reasons for making the goals of an engineering project apparent. First, we have seen how concepts and words can be changed for malignant intent. For example, calling the ‘inflicting of severe pain or suffering on someone as a punishment or in order to force them to do or say something’ enhanced interrogation, instead of torture. What are the goals behind such an engineering of language? As I can see, there are three goals here: (1) justify torture, and (2) lessen the appearance of moral wrongness and (3) extract information. These are all ethical questions, and with this knowledge we can more easily argue why this approach is wrong. In addition, CE is mostly done outside of philosophy (in everything from advertising

¹⁶⁰ C.f. Plunkett (2015); Plunkett & Sundell (2019).

¹⁶¹ I might be idealizing scientists here. Sometimes, there is what scientists actually *do*, and then there is what they *say* that they do, which need not be the same thing. I think the point still stands, however.

agencies to security forces and their 'information programs'), by benign as well as malign forces. Sometimes the same forces, but seen from different vantage points - such as the old saying that one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter. It just strikes me that conceptual engineers seem wilfully ignorant of the social and political forces forcefully engaged in CE on a full time basis.

The second reason for why goals should be made apparent in CE is to make the purpose behind the proposal clear. There does not need to be any malignant intent behind the engineering of words and concepts for the proposals to be bad. There are at least two other reasons: the goal(s) might not be fruitful and/or the tactic is not a good way to achieve the goal(s). So, if you make the goal explicit, to achieve gender equality, then evaluate *the goal in itself* and the *relationship* between the goal and the tactic.

4.3 Taking Stock

In a recent talk held by Koch and Ohlhorst on the potential mind-expanding powers of CE, they introduce some similar questions that I ask here: What does it mean to engineer concepts? How must concepts be so that we can engineer them? Is CE even feasible? Can engineering proposals be implemented?¹⁶² And then they go on to state that they will ignore these questions, and assume that concepts *are* something we can engineer, and that proposals to engineer them are implementable and feasible. One is left questioning the purpose of the talk by Koch and Ohlhorst when what they are assuming is so fundamental. It is like questioning where to travel if we could travel faster than the speed of light.¹⁶³ It is perhaps an exciting hypothetical for a science fiction novel, but is it a fruitful way to do philosophy?¹⁶⁴ Assumptions are, and need to be made, in philosophy, but if the assumptions are the core problems of CE, then perhaps assuming them is unwise? I think, rather, that most projects should be aligned to face these issues, instead of assuming that we one day will overcome them.

Fabianism affects the goals and tactics of CE in different ways. Some CE projects are simply deemed infeasible, like Haslanger's amelioration of WOMAN. I do not assume

¹⁶² Koch & Ohlhorst, 2022. This is just an example of a tendency in CE, and so the purpose here is not to undermine their project.

¹⁶³ The analogy is a bit incomplete, since faster-than-light travel is *theoretically impossible*, while enforced conceptual change is *practically improbable*.

¹⁶⁴ There is, of course, the chance that by actually addressing the issue shows that it is actually possible to change concepts (sort of performative action, and a bit self-undermining, but in a good way).

exhaustiveness, however, but would like to see more projects adopting something like Fabianism and taking the foundational issues seriously when giving their proposals. I could go on to say more about how Fabianism affects amelioration, but my primary interest is on how conceptual engineers *assess* concepts (before we consider how to fix them). I believe that the framework that Fabianism gives has important consequences for the way that conceptual engineers should go about assessing concepts, and so this is the focus for the rest of the thesis.

Part II

Functionalism

Interlude

A direct implication of Fabianism, as I see it, is that we should adopt a functionalist account of concepts. I disagree with Cappelen that an explicit choice has to be made about what concepts *actually are*. In fact, it is odd that conceptual engineers ask normative questions about what our concepts ought to be, but ask descriptive questions about what the concept CONCEPT actually is. I am not interested in the nature of concepts, what constitutes a concept, and *what* makes a concept defective/successful. I think this is the wrong question to ask. Cappelen says that, if you chose concept as the subject matter in CE, you have three options.¹⁶⁵ I think this misses the point. Instead of asking what concepts are, we should ask how the concept CONCEPT should be to best serve our purposes.¹⁶⁶ To see how, we have to consider how concepts *function* in a given framework.

If we are adopting Fabianism, which is to engineer *frameworks*, and not just individual concepts, we need to consider how concepts *function* in these frameworks, and *not* on improving defective properties of *individual* concepts, as has been the prominent emphasis so far. Adopting a functionalist account might be bad news for conceptual repair, and better news for conceptual innovation, since the former focuses on fixing individual concepts, while the latter focuses on fixing conceptual schemes. A lot could be said about how we should adopt Functionalism in amelioration, but some conceptual engineers are already arguing that we should focus more on innovation,¹⁶⁷ and others on how we can use function to achieve this.¹⁶⁸ I think, however, that there is a role left to be played for conceptual repair, but with a focus on fixing how concepts *function* in a framework. A more interesting notion that has received less notice is how a functionalist approach would affect the *assessment* of concepts. I have hitherto ignored assessment for this very purpose, and will focus on this in the remaining two chapters, seeing how two different types of assessment aligns with Fabianism via Functionalism:

¹⁶⁵ Cappelen's (2018, p. 141) three options: (i) Concepts are entities that fulfill functions. (ii) Concepts are entities with constitutive principles. (iii) Concepts are entities that persist over time.

¹⁶⁶ If the reader is unconvinced of this move, they can read Part II as if I have adopted the view that concepts are entities that fulfill functions (see previous footnote). Which is, strictly speaking, true - I just do not see it as contradicting the views that concepts have properties and that concepts can persist over time, as Cappelen seems to. If I am forced into taking a choice over referentialism and inferentialism (to borrow terminology from Williamson, 2009), I am inclined towards the former. See Eklund (2021a, p. 12) for a brief discussion of this in CE, where he names himself and Scharp inferentialists, and Cappelen and Haslanger referentialists.

¹⁶⁷ Most notably, Simion (2018) and Simion & Kelp (2020).

¹⁶⁸ Most notably, Thomasson (2020; 2022); Jorem (2022).

Functionalism: Concepts should be assessed according to how they function in a framework.¹⁶⁹

The purpose here is not to defend Functionalism, as it would require a thesis of its own, and much has already been said about concepts performing functions.¹⁷⁰ What I can do is consider how Fabianism, through Functionalism, affects how concepts should be assessed.

Functionalism has not been the dominant approach to assessment in CE, where it has been to determine what makes a concept *defective*. Call this approach to assessment *categorical concept assessment* (Diagnosis, for short). In Diagnosis, *intrinsic properties* have been used as criteria for determining whether or not a concept is defective. This approach has little value given Fabianism, because its defective properties have little to do with how concepts can aid theories and frameworks, and whether or not a concept has defective properties is irrelevant for most uses of the concept. Contrast this method with *comparative concept assessment* (Comparison, for short), where the approach is to figure out how one concept can be better than another concept.¹⁷¹ In Comparison, functions are already being used as criteria for determining which concepts are better and why. In sum, there have been two distinct approaches to assessment using two distinct criteria. The approaches are *comparative* and *categorical*, and the criteria for assessment are *functions* and *intrinsic properties*. I conclude that only comparative concept assessment is coherent with Fabianism, because they (can) adopt function as criteria.

Part II consists of two chapters. In the first, Chapter 5, I present the two ways of assessment. In the second, Chapter 6, I argue that we should assess concepts comparatively, because functions can be used as criteria for concept assessment.

¹⁶⁹ This is Functionalism about concept assessment. More broadly, Functionalism would include not only how concepts should be assessed, but also how concepts should be fixed (by improving how they function). See Thomasson's (2020) Pragmatic Method to how we can approach improving concepts in this way. If Thomasson is right in arguing that we should improve concepts based on how they function, then I think this supports my argument that we should assess concepts by how they function since both are about how concepts function.

¹⁷⁰ For defense of concepts fulfilling functions see, especially, Thomasson (2020; 2022) and Haslanger (2000; 2012).

¹⁷¹ Thanks to Sigurd Jorem for suggesting the labels *categorical* and *comparative*.

Chapter 5. How to Assess Concepts?

It is common in CE to describe the method as consisting of three stages:

- (i) *Assessing* concepts and terms.
- (ii) Suggesting ways to improve concepts (*amelioration*).
- (iii) Efforts to *implement* the suggestions in (ii).¹⁷²

Consider the Covid Variant Case from the Introduction. First, you assess the problem: using exonyms (non-native geographical names) for the virus strains cause stigmatization against countries and their citizens. Second, you find a way to fix this: change the designation of the variants from exonyms to Greek letters (terminological improvement). Third, you make an effort to implement the change: the WHO announces to the public that the names for the virus strains are changing and why (implementation is seldom, if ever, this easy in philosophy). We considered amelioration in Part I, focusing on how the implementation problem, amongst other issues, affects the approach that conceptual engineers should have towards fixing concepts. The argument was that ameliorators should be more moderate and aligned with empirical research in their proposals to change concepts (realistic tactics), and engineer concepts for particular purposes (apparent goals), making up Fabianism. Now we come to how Fabianism affects assessment.

The purpose of this chapter is merely to present two ways of assessing concepts. There are two sections, the first on categorical concept assessment, the second on comparative concept assessment.

5.1 Categorical Concept Assessment

In categorical assessment, or Diagnosis, you assess if and how (and to what degree) a concept is defective. For Cappelen and Scharp, CE is all about diagnosis and conceptual repair: you assess

¹⁷² In my opinion, the stages are interrelated, and strictly speaking, not stages because we assess when ameliorating, and need to consider the implementation challenge in our assessment/amelioration. It is widely agreed in the field that is about *assessing* and *improving/ameliorating* concepts (or representational devices). See, for instance, Cappelen, 2018; Isaac, 2020, 2021; Burgess & Plunkett, 2020. Some have come to view the implementation challenge as so central to CE, that it should count as its own stage. See, for instance, Cappelen, 2020a; Cappelen & Plunkett, 2020; Chalmers, 2020.

what is defective, and then you fix that defect.¹⁷³ PLANET_{OLD} is a defective concept because one of its canonical instances (Pluto) is similar to celestial objects that are not in the extension of PLANET_{OLD}.¹⁷⁴ TRUTH is a defective concept, according to Scharp, because thinking with TRUTH leads to paradoxes.¹⁷⁵ ART, ASSERTION, DEMOCRACY are all defective concepts, according to Cappelen, because they, to various degrees, do not have a stable meanings, and lack fruitfulness.¹⁷⁶

There are predominantly five intrinsic properties that have been proposed as criteria for what makes a concept defective: inexactness, nonsense, bad effects, incoherence and inconsistency.¹⁷⁷ Take inexactness as an example. A concept that is inexact is considered defective because it does not accurately or precisely denote what it is supposed to.¹⁷⁸ Take the concept WATER as an example. Before the discovery that water was H₂O, WATER was assumed to be a liquid which included much more than what we think of as water today. Call this concept WATER_{OLD}. Thanks to Henry Cavendish, we now know that the composition of water is H₂O. Call this concept WATER_{NEW}. The concept WATER_{NEW} is more exact than the concept WATER_{OLD} because the concept includes information about the composition of water (intension), and because the concept makes clear which liquids are in the extension of WATER and which are not.¹⁷⁹

The goal of diagnosing a concept is either to flag what is wrong or defective about the concept, or make the defect clear so that the concept can be repaired. Like an engineer, you try to fix what is broken, but there are exceptions: when you do not know how to fix the defect and when the machinery works fine with the defect. The same goes for concepts. The concept TRUTH can illustrate both cases. Several logicians and epistemologists agree that TRUTH is a defective

¹⁷³ Consider, for example, Cappelen (with Plunkett, 2020, p. 3): “Once you have detected a defect in a representational device you care about, it’s natural to think about how to improve it.”

¹⁷⁴ Pinder, 2020.

¹⁷⁵ Scharp, 2013.

¹⁷⁶ Cappelen, 2021c; 2010; 2021a, respectively.

¹⁷⁷ Eklund (2021a, p. 18.) mentions indeterminacy and presuppositions as ways in which a concept can be defective. Indeterminacy is similar to Carnap’s notion of inexactness, and encompasses Cappelen’s notion of vagueness. A presupposition is, as Eklund (2021a, p. 18.) writes “[...] that the use of the concept in some sense presupposes the truth of a false view.” This kind of presupposition is often caused by some logical fallacy, for example a loaded question: “Have you stopped beating your wife?” which presupposes both that the person in question has a wife and that this person has been beating her habitually.

¹⁷⁸ There are other definitions of inexactness, which is unproblematic for my approach, because it helps illustrate that there is some confusion of what makes a concept inexact.

¹⁷⁹ I.e., both the intension (the definition of water has changed) and extension (WATER_{OLD} include more liquids than WATER_{NEW}) has changed because of the discovery that the composition of water is H₂O.

concept because it leads to paradoxes.¹⁸⁰ Few agree, however, on how to solve this defect (they do not know how to fix it). They still, however, use the concept of TRUTH to make inferences about sentences and propositions. The concept is still useful, even though it contains defects. In these cases, it is important to *flag* the concept so that theorists are aware of the pits so that they do not fall into them. Perhaps a fix can be found in the future; perhaps the defect is too small to bother about. Ideally, however, Diagnosis leads to conceptual repair. Diagnosis and conceptual repair are problem-oriented, and share defective concepts as their aim of inquiry. With categorical assessment, you find, clarify and assess the defect, and with conceptual repair you find a way to fix that defect.¹⁸¹

Diagnosis is useful for, at least, three reasons. First, although restoring concepts is necessary with the aid of comparative concept assessment, there will always be a need for fixing, and a diagnosis for pointing out the problem. If a car breaks down, you have to figure out what the problem is before trying to fix it. In the planet case, the Diagnosis was quite simple: nine canonical instances is not a good definition of a PLANET given new findings. Sometimes a theory or a framework, like a bridge, collapses. Such collapses cannot always be foreseen, in conceptual- or civil engineering. For example, the “collapse” of KNOWLEDGE. “For 2000 years the standard philosophical model of knowledge was that it could be defined as justified true belief.”¹⁸² Edmund Gettier wrote a three-page paper that mounted a simple and convincing challenge against KNOWLEDGE as justified true belief.¹⁸³ In a sense, this paper by Gettier is a Diagnosis of TRUTH: it is *not* justified true belief.

Second, it is arguably more important to diagnose something that is defective, and fix that defect, than to make improvements on something that is already working. In fact, Isaac presents a worry of this nature that he calls *verschlimmbessern*: to disimprove, or make worse, when trying to make improvements.¹⁸⁴ Like trying to be quiet, but making more noise because you are trying to be quiet. The argument is basically that if we are not fixing defects, specifically, but

¹⁸⁰ They might not agree that it is the *concept* that is defective, but rather that there are some problems with using the concept for particular purposes.

¹⁸¹ It is like having your own doctor who diagnoses the illness (a diagnostician), and then another doctor (say, a surgeon) who fixes the illness. The doctor might, of course, be the same person. The point is that different jobs require different skills, and need not be connected: we can diagnose without fixing (terminal illness), and a surgeon might operate without a Diagnosis (idiopathic diseases).

¹⁸² Schukraft, 2017.

¹⁸³ Gettier, 1963.

¹⁸⁴ *Verschlimmbessern* (counter-intentional disimproving) is aimed at the possible risks of conceptual innovation (proclaimed by Isaac in a talk by Eklund, 2021b).

trying to make improvements on concepts that are not defective, then we have no way of knowing whether we are making the concepts better or worse. I do not find this argument convincing. In part, because we *do* have ways of knowing whether we are making concepts better or worse: we can use comparative concept assessment, and argue that a concept performs better on certain functions (see upcoming chapter). Aside from verschlimmbessern, it is perhaps more important, or at least urgent, to fix a bridge (and work overtime) if cars cannot cross, than it is to restore the bridge. Similarly, with concepts, if a theory is proving unsuccessful, then it is important to diagnose what is defective.

As I see it, there are two aspects to Diagnosis: detection and examination. Consider a person, Wilson. Wilson is, in this analogy, a framework. Wilson is coming in for his yearly check-up. The doctor or diagnostician, call him House, does an examination of Wilson. Wilson has a fever and his blood samples are not quite right. House has successfully detected that Wilson is sick, but does not yet know what is wrong with Wilson. To find this out, House has to examine Wilson. Analogously, we can sometimes tell that there is something wrong with a certain framework or theory, but not quite know what it is - and it might be a concept, or how concepts interact with each other.¹⁸⁵

Now, it is rare that concepts sit in the waiting room awaiting Diagnosis, and this might illustrate an important (and overlooked) aspect of Diagnosis. Most of the time, conceptual engineers seem to have the defective concepts already in their microscopes: Haslanger with WOMAN and GENDER, Scharp with TRUTH, Appiah (and Haslanger) with RACE, and so on. I think this is rare in philosophy. Most of the time it is not *one* concept that is in the microscope, but rather a theory or framework that is somehow failing or seemingly defective. I think an important aspect of CE, or at least philosophy, is to detect when a conceptual scheme or a theory is not working properly; when is there a verbal dispute or a need for a conceptual negotiation for example? A very important step is to notice that it is *concepts*, either on its own or in collaboration with each other, that are causing these problems (like theories not being fruitful, not having explanatory value, et.c).

¹⁸⁵ C.f. the Duhem-Quine problem.

5.2 Comparative Concept Assessment

Comparative concept assessment is comparing two or more concepts with the purpose of deciding which one is better. Consider the concepts being compared as competing for the same job. Comparison is not about random concepts, like, what makes BIRD a better concept than FISH? The question is context-specific. As with job applicants, we can ask who/what seems better equipped for the job, and why? I begin this section with an example of Comparison, illustrating how different types of concepts can be compared, before ending with some reasons for why Comparison is useful. I find the Planet Case especially equipped for such an illustration.¹⁸⁶

The International Astronomical Union (IAU) decided in 2006 to revise the concept of PLANET. In the 20th century there was no accepted definition of what a planet was, it only had nine canonical instances. Call this concept PLANET_{OLD}. In the early 21st century, however, similar celestial objects to Pluto were discovered near Neptune. This created a conundrum for IAU, whereupon they outlined two different candidates to replace PLANET_{OLD}:

PLANET_{DRAFT}: a celestial object X that (a) orbits the sun, (b) is sufficiently large for its own gravity to have formed it into a sphere

PLANET_{NEW}: a celestial object X that (a) orbits the sun, (b) is sufficiently large for its own gravity to have formed it into a sphere, and (c) *has cleared its neighbourhood of debris*.¹⁸⁷

The two proposals only differ with regard to criterion (c). Selecting PLANET_{DRAFT}, Pluto would still be a planet, but so would Eris. Following a vote, the IAU selected PLANET_{NEW}.

The Planet Case is illustrative because there are three concepts in play. The the existing concept: PLANET_{OLD}, and two possible replacement concepts: PLANET_{DRAFT} and PLANET_{NEW}. There are other types of Comparison, but to simplify, we can distinguish between two types: a Comparison between two (or more) options for a role and a Comparison between an existing, actual concept and a possible concept.¹⁸⁸ It has already been decided, in the Planet Case, that PLANET_{OLD} is defective and should be replaced. The relevant question is which of the proposals

¹⁸⁶ The Planet Case is often mentioned in the CE literature (see, for instance, Dever, 2020, and Egré & O'Madagain, 2019). I base the approach on Pinder's (2020) reading of the case, as he focuses on how the concepts function.

¹⁸⁷ Pinder, 2020, p. 3.

¹⁸⁸ There can also be a comparison between several *actual concepts*, if there are several concepts in use, but a disagreement on the correct usage. KNOWLEDGE as justified true belief and KNOWLEDGE as basic belief are two different actual concepts one can compare.

should replace it.¹⁸⁹ The Comparison here is between the two possible concepts. It is not difficult to imagine a scenario, however, where a proposal to revise the concept PLANET_{OLD} came *before* the discovery of the objects similar to Pluto, simply because canonical instances is often an insufficient way of defining a concept. If a proposal, like PLANET_{DRAFT}, were to have been given before the decision that PLANET_{OLD} was defective, a Comparison should be done between these two concepts. This Comparison is between a possible concept and an actual concept. To use the job analogy, two or more concepts might be “interviewed” for the same job, whether it be a new job opening (a new role for a concept to play) or an existing job. The point is simply that two or more concepts are being compared, whether they be new applicants or the concept who currently has the job. We have, in other words, cases where Comparison is needed *after* the discovery or explanation that a concept is defective, and *regardless* of a concept being defective.

Comparative concept assessment is seldom as picturesque as painted by the PLANET case. In philosophy, especially, there is no vote on what concept to go forward with. There is, however, a kind of metalinguistic, or conceptual, negotiation, be it conscious or not.¹⁹⁰ Take a mundane example first. Imagine that Sophie hates salads, while Phil loves salads. Phil is surprised, and asks Sophie why she hates salads, and Sophie replies that it is boring and consists only of cold vegetables. Phil argues that a salad is much more than that, and that you can have potatoes, pasta and meats in a salad - and the salad does not even have to be cold. Sophie accepts that a salad might have other ingredients, but stands firm on the fact that a salad has to be cold. Phil concedes, at least for the sake of argument, makes a cold salad with chicken, pasta and potatoes, and asks Sophie if she likes salads *now*? Sophie has to admit that, with this new definition of what a salad is, she does. After a negotiation of what salad is, or should be, they can make meaningful judgements about SALADS. The dispute over SALAD has been resolved. Similarly with concepts in philosophy. After the Gettier problems for KNOWLEDGE (see next section), there has been a conceptual negotiation about what KNOWLEDGE is, or should be, by proposing different theories and criteria for KNOWLEDGE. There is even a metalinguistic negotiation in contemporary

¹⁸⁹ We see here that comparative concept assessment does not have to come *prior* to the amelioration, as the word “stages” suggest, but could be a part of the amelioration itself.

¹⁹⁰ For an account on metalinguistic negotiation, see Plunkett (2015) and Plunkett & Sundell (2019). Cappelen (2018) objects to this account, because it makes implausible predictions about what speakers care about. Plunkett and Sundell (2021) nicely answers the objection by making a distinction between “*which disagreements speakers have vs. which disagreements are immediately expressed in a given linguistic language,*” attempting to resolve their dispute with Cappelen using metalinguistic negotiation. Thomasson (2016) also argues for an understanding of past debates as implicitly involving conceptual/metalinguistic negotiation.

philosophy of replacing KNOWLEDGE with UNDERSTANDING as the ultimate, or at least epistemic, virtue of philosophy.¹⁹¹ UNDERSTANDING is suggested as a kind of replacement for the job that KNOWLEDGE does. A Comparison is necessary to contribute to this metalinguistic negotiation: what makes UNDERSTANDING better at this job (aim for philosophy) than KNOWLEDGE?

Comparison is useful for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is versatile. As seen above, Comparison is an important part of metalinguistic negotiation, as well as many different aspects of philosophy. Comparison is useful for all three approaches in CE to improve our conceptual schemes: terminological improvement, conceptual repair and conceptual innovation. Whether you propose a new term or a new concept, and whether that is innovation or repair, you should compare the possible concept to the actual concept (repair) and other possible concepts (innovation). One thing is to assess whether the new concept does a better job on what you want it to, another thing is to assess what you might lose by changing or replacing a concept. Do you lose something important with PLANET_{NEW} and UNDERSTANDING, which you had with PLANET_{OLD} and KNOWLEDGE? Abandoning KNOWLEDGE might lose, just to name one example, an important link between gaining knowledge and the good life, that goes all the way back to Socrates. Can UNDERSTANDING provide a similar link? With PLANET_{NEW}, you literally lose Pluto.

The second reason for why Comparison is useful, specifically in CE, is that the method does not depend on a concept being defective. As Simion & Kelp stress, “[...] all that’s needed for a CE project is improvement, not fixing a defect.”¹⁹² Comparison is a solution-oriented endeavor: finding/making better conceptual schemes. As an analogy, why wait for something to be broken before we fix it? Technically, we only fix what is broken, but it is the level of deterioration that matters. You get the car fixed before it breaks down; you get yourself treated before you break down. Analogously, it is the level of dysfunctionality of the concept that matters. There is a difference between not being ideal and not being optimal, and finally being non-functional. We restore cars and ourselves as we should restore concepts.¹⁹³ Consider the theory of evolution, presenting an entirely new picture of how humans came to be. Focusing entirely on defective concepts might limit our endeavor to improve our conceptual schemes. Moreover, sometimes it might be difficult to find what is defective, or even be aware of

¹⁹¹ See, for instance, Hannon & Nguyen (2021).

¹⁹² Simion & Kelp, 2018, p. 987.

¹⁹³ But view concepts as the building blocks, or the tools to restore the houses, and not the houses themselves. The houses themselves are something like frameworks, as argued for in Chapter 4.

something being defective, as with the theory of evolution. Switching the point of view beyond detecting defects might even help detect defects.

Chapter 6. Functionalism

Conceptual engineers should adopt a comparative approach to assessment because they can use function as a criteria for determining how concepts are better than other concepts. But first, I have something to say about why diagnosis is incoherent with Functionalism (and therefore Fabianism).

6.1 Diagnosis & Functionalism

Categorical concept assessment is incoherent with Functionalism because assessing how concepts function is, by default, comparative. If you are a manager of a football team, and you have a striker on your team, assessing how good that striker is will always be a comparison with other strikers, other teammates, how the striker fits in with the team, etc. In and by itself, this does not necessarily mean that we should abandon the notion of defective concepts. Following Fabianism, however, there seems to be little value in assessing individual defective concepts because its defective properties have little to do with how concepts can aid theories and frameworks. I think we should focus more on defective frameworks, than defective concepts. Perhaps in a few cases, with some core philosophical concepts like TRUTH, it might be beneficial to do a diagnosis. So far, all that has been contributed to the debate is the claim that, “Most, if not all, philosophically interesting concepts are defective.”¹⁹⁴ This statement is either obviously false or trivially true based on where you draw the identity conditions of what a CONCEPTUAL DEFECT is, and thereby what should be included in the extension of CONCEPTUAL DEFECT.

Another reason for why assessing individual defective concepts lacks utility given Fabianism is that whether or not a concept has defective properties is irrelevant for most uses of the concept. Compare a concept with a human doing a job. This worker can have diabetes and a bad knee, but can still manage to do his job - unless the bad knee or diabetes somehow hinders him from doing it. It is the same with concepts. As long as the intrinsic defect does not affect the job that we expect of it, the intrinsic defect is irrelevant. As we shall see, many consider TRUTH to

¹⁹⁴ Scharp, 2020, p. 397.

be a defective concept because it inhabits an intrinsic defect, but the concept still works quite nicely, for example, as a concept for distinguishing between truth and lies. The intrinsic defects that TRUTH may or may not inhabit are irrelevant for this particular purpose (and many more). It is rather how the concept *functions* for a theory or a framework that we should focus on diagnosing, and fixing.

If we are questioning what concepts ought to be, then we are questioning what they ought to be for a particular purpose. Those purposes, as held by Fabianism, should be to aid something that has better explanatory and predictive value than concepts have, like theories and frameworks. Before concepts can show that they too can do the job that theories are doing, I do think we need to take a step back, and rather tinker with our concepts to make realistic, and gradual changes - ala Fabianism. Perhaps we can determine whether a concept is defective according to how it functions in a framework, but then the assessment would be comparative. The question that has been asked is a categorical one: what makes concept C defective? I think this is the wrong question to ask when considering concepts, as we should do, in a bigger framework.¹⁹⁵ *If it is relevant to ask what is defective about concepts, I think the relevant question is *how are the concepts defective?** To answer this question, we have to look at how concepts function in particular frameworks, a comparative notion.¹⁹⁶

6.2 Comparison & Functionalism

As stated in the introduction, this is not a test of the position Functionalism, but rather how adopting Functionalism (because of Fabianism) affects concept assessment.

Comparison is compatible with both Fabianism and Functionalism for the simple reason that it uses functions as a criteria for determining which concepts are better and why. In this last section, therefore, I present a promising model by Amie Thomasson to how we can use functions to assess concepts, as well as two cases where functions have already been used successfully to determine how a concept functions better than another concept.

¹⁹⁵ Because of the Duhem-Quine problem (Stanford, 2021).

¹⁹⁶ The notion of whether a concept is defective is less important in a comparative approach, because we can only make changes when we have a possible concept, a replacement ready at hand.

6.2.1 The Pragmatic Model

Amie Thomasson describes the pragmatic model as consisting of three steps:

- i. Reverse engineering
- ii. Identifying the functions to be [performed]
- iii. Engineering to [perform] the function.¹⁹⁷

The third step in the pragmatic model is *engineering* to serve the function, i.e. engaging in terminological improvement, conceptual repair or conceptual innovation. This is beyond assessment, and not of relevance here.

The first step of the pragmatic model, reverse engineering, is to figure out what the functions of the concepts are or have been. Thomasson does not flesh out this strategy, but she gives two distinct options. One is engaging in a conceptual genealogy: looking at the origin of the concept, on why the term was introduced, its different uses, etc. Although this might sometimes be fruitful,¹⁹⁸ I think it is often complicated and unnecessary. If we are interested in a concept's function, we are interested in its *current* functions. On the second option focusing on how a concept currently functions, Thomasson uses the analogy of a discovered piece of malware in a software. In such cases, you *investigate* what it does and can do, and gain clues to determine what functions it performs and how it performs them.¹⁹⁹ For philosophy, they, "[...] purport to identify something that this range of concepts *does* or (better) *enables us to do*, that we couldn't do (or couldn't do as effectively or efficiently) without it."²⁰⁰

The second step in the pragmatic model is "[...] determining what functions (if any) these concepts *should* serve, are *to* serve going forward, given the goals and purposes we have."²⁰¹ I think this is a very promising notion. Consider two quick examples. In Haslanger's proposal, for example, she wants the concept of *woman* to perform the function of (F1) including subordination into the intension for the goal of gender equality. In the Covid Variant Case, the new terminology performs the functions of (F1) avoiding stigma and (F2) encouraging discovery

¹⁹⁷ Thomasson, 2020, p. 447-49.

¹⁹⁸ Dutilh-Novaes (2021) uses conceptual genealogy to clarify the explicandum, perhaps providing a diagnosis of what is defective with an explicandum. Plunkett (2016) argues that conceptual history/genealogy can help in normative and evaluative issues.

¹⁹⁹ Thomasson, 2020, p. 447-48.

²⁰⁰ Thomasson, 2020, p. 448.

²⁰¹ Thomasson, 2020, p. 448-49.

and disclosure of new covid variants. Dividing into the functions we want concepts to perform seems promising as a standard for assessing concepts.

6.2.2 Two Cases

I focus on Pinder's (2020) and Simion and Kelp's (2000), although there are several other cases of using functions as criteria for assessment. As I simply want to illustrate the promise of this approach, two cases should suffice. I begin with Pinder's PLANET, and then move onto Simion and Kelp's hypothetical WOMAN.

Mark Pinder develops an account of conceptual *fruitfulness*, which he marks as the most important success condition for engineering a concept.²⁰² Pinder denotes fruitfulness as “[...] whatever theorists ought to aim for when engineering their concepts.”²⁰³ “Whatever” is a bit vague, but Pinder specifies what he is after:

Fruitfulness: “An explicatum is fruitful insofar as its replacement of the corresponding explicandum would facilitate, through the ordinary course of inquiry, progress towards achieving relevant theoretical goals.”²⁰⁴

Pinder lists two relevant theoretical goals based on aims stated on the IAU website:

- (1) *to provide clearly-defined astronomical nomenclature*
- (2) *to provide a taxonomy for celestial objects that reflects our current understanding.*²⁰⁵

According to Pinder, these are purely theoretical goals, and accepting that these are the only relevant goals, revising PLANET would facilitate progress.²⁰⁶ As I see it, *relevant theoretical goals* are *functions* that we want PLANET to perform. PLANET_{OLD} did not perform these function, but PLANET_{NEW}, does. Using functions (1) and (2) as criteria, we can conclude that PLANET_{NEW} is better than PLANET_{OLD}. Pinder, or perhaps more accurately, the IAU, follows the pragmatic model in (i) identifying the functions that the competing concepts should perform, F1 and F2, and (ii) compared two concepts, PLANET_{NEW} and PLANET_{DRAFT}, based on F1 and F2, deciding that

²⁰² Pinder (2020) focuses on a specific way of engineering concepts, namely explication, where one replaces an inexact, non-scientific concept, with a more exact, scientific concept (as inspired by Carnap).

²⁰³ Pinder, 2020, p. 3. As such, Pinder's notion of fruitfulness is broader than Carnap's.

²⁰⁴ Pinder, 2020, p. 6.

²⁰⁵ Pinder, 2020, p. 13.

²⁰⁶ Pinder, 2020, p. 13.

PLANET_{NEW} performs better on these two functions. Therefore, our categorization of the solar system (framework) has improved.

Simion and Kelp gives a hypothetical:

... say that there was nothing wrong with our concept WOMAN, semantically, morally, politically or otherwise; say that it is a perfectly coherent concept, and its current shape has no detrimental effects whatsoever on women's moral, political or epistemic life. Say, however, that it could be engineered so as to substantially improve women's lives. Would it not be worthwhile to attempt to do so? We take it to be pretty clear that the answer here can only be 'yes'.²⁰⁷

In my opinion, this is not merely a hypothetical, but an apt explanation of what Haslanger's (2000) was trying to achieve. She did not try to *fix* the concept of WOMAN, Haslanger was trying to *use* the concept to make lives *better* for women regardless of any defects about the concept. In fact, there are no *intrinsic properties* that are defective in WOMAN, it is only defective with regard to Haslanger's purpose for it; the *function* that Haslanger wants the concept WOMAN to perform. The function in question here is (F1): 'making lives better for women.' Ignoring the specifics of the proposal and the likelihood of success, then, if a possible concept, WOMAN_{NEW}, performs better on F1 than WOMAN_{OLD}. Simion and Kelp also follows the pragmatic model of (i) identifying the function, 'making lives better for women', that WOMAN should perform, and (albeit shortly) compares WOMAN_{NEW} to WOMAN_{OLD} based on this function.

Both cases show us how we can assess, or judge concepts based on a standard, namely functions. Basing proposals on functions is aligned with Fabianism because it give us a better overview of the goals of the proposals, and the tactics (functions) to achieve those goals. In addition, it focuses on improving our conceptual scheme/framework, and not merely a concept for its own sake.

6.3 Taking Stock

Not only is Diagnosis incoherent with Functionalism and Fabianism, it is also infeasible. The Duhem-Quine problem states that you don't falsify propositions, you falsify theories. What this means is that when you have a theory, which is predictably unsuccessful, you do not know where to put the blame. You do not know where the fault lies. A theory is successful up to a particular point, and when it starts being unsuccessful, having particular failures, you cannot just get rid of

²⁰⁷ Simion & Kelp, 2020, p. 988.

it if you do not know where the fault lies. The only way to improve is to come up with other potential replacements. This is why comparative concept assessment is viable given a feasible picture of CE (Fabianism). We cannot, at least not usually, go into a theory and find the problematic concept because you can't deduce interesting consequences from a singular sentence. Only from a cluster of sentences. So, if you have a cluster of sentences, you do not know which sentence is the problem. This is why categorical concept assessment is invalid given a feasible picture of CE (Fabianism).

The purpose of Part II has been to consider an implication of Fabianism, Functionalism, and what adopting these positions affects concept assessment in CE. The process of assessment is bound to be much more complicated than what conceptual engineers have presented, having to figure in different uses of concepts, and their relation in a framework. Burgess and Plunkett touch on some of these issues in what they call conceptual ethics.²⁰⁸ According to Thomasson, however, they give few (if any) guidelines on how to go about this: “[...] they leave most of these questions open, and don't propose anything like a unified approach to addressing problems in conceptual ethics.”²⁰⁹ The common denominator for addressing problems in CE, and conceptual ethics, should be functions. The conclusion is, therefore, that we should focus on how concepts function when assessing concepts. Furthermore, we should *not* just assess concepts, but assess the situation more broadly, assessing on conceptual frameworks, and not just individual concepts.

²⁰⁸ Burgess & Plunkett (2013a; 2013b). See also Burgess & Plunkett (2020) on the relation between CE and conceptual ethics, where they argue that conceptual ethics is an integral part of CE.

²⁰⁹ Thomasson, 2020, p. 437.

Conclusion

“All words are equal, but some words are more equal than others” is the headline of this thesis, and, of course, a spiff of *Animal Farm*, by George Orwell. There are several aspects to this simile of relevance here. In the book, animals take over the farm from the humans, and establish *Animalist* commandments. The final rule is that “All animals are equal”, but the leader, pig Napoleon, revises the final rule, and pretends that it was the following rule all along: “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.”²¹⁰ The first relevance is that pig Napoleon revised the language to achieve the goal of being in power. This is an example of CE, and a danger of CE. The second relevance is that the animals set out with idealism, trying to create a utopia of progress, justice and equality, a type of optimism I criticized CE for committing in Part I. Moving specifically to the headline, the third relevance refers to the Nietzschean skepticism of accepting words at face value: all concepts are the constructs of humans, created equal. Created by humans, they are flawed, and not equally good, and so we should not trust them. Some words and concepts *are* actually more equal (better) than others. While the revised rule is terrible for animals (and analogously for humans), it is a *good* rule for *concepts*. We can segregate concepts, and determine how good they are, based on the job that they are doing; based on the function that they are fulfilling on the farm/framework.

I have introduced the method of CE which is to take a normative approach to our concepts and conceptual scheme by using our concepts to achieve certain goals. I illustrated that CE does not entail improvement of concepts, nor does it assume that the proposals to change concepts are based on good intentions. It is therefore important to properly assess the method, and each proposal, to determine whether the chances of improvement are good. In Chapter 2, I gave three ways of improving our concepts and conceptual scheme: terminological improvement, conceptual repair and conceptual innovation. In Chapter 3, I presented four foundational issues that CE faces, where the implementation challenge and feasibility problems are especially salient. In Chapter 4, therefore, I argued that CE should embrace a position I call Fabianism, which consists of two important parts. First, CE proposals should have more realistic tactics, taking the foundational issues seriously. At the moment, proposals to change concepts are not getting implemented, and empirical research about concepts and conceptual schemes are not

²¹⁰ A criticism of the Stalinist Russia, trying out for communism, but ending as absolute rulers.

being taken into consideration. If conceptual engineers hope to make real changes happen, they should aim to make less extensive changes to the meaning of concepts, for a particular use of the concept with the purpose of aiding a framework. Concepts are not like theories; they do not produce high explanatory value, nor predictive value. A concept is a worker, working for a big company, and it is the company that can make changes happen, not the individual worker (except for exceptional circumstances). Concepts are tools to help drive changes, they are not the driver of changes themselves. According to Fabianism, we should engineer conceptual frameworks, and not individual concepts.

A functionalist account of concepts seems to follow from Fabianism, as it allows for an assessment and engineering of concepts according to how they function in a framework. In Part II, I considered two distinct approaches to assessment, and argued that we can only do a comparative concept assessment given Fabianism. Diagnosing concepts as defective seems to have little utility, but concepts can be assessed according to how they function - and if the function is insufficient, this could be something like a defective function.

I concluded, in Part II, that we should refer to *functions* that we want the concept to serve to serve as a standard for concept assessment. Some conceptual engineers, like Thomasson, have already argued that a concept can be said to be better than another concept with regards to how well it serves a certain function. I would like to end with an interesting question sneaking up on us: have we pushed the assessment down a chain? What I mean is this: does Functionalism propose that we assess *functions* and not concepts? Instead of assessing whether concepts are good enough, we have to assess if a function is good enough. Not only that, but we have to evaluate whether or not that is a function for that particular concept to serve. Assessing functions seems more complicated than assessing concepts, because you have to compare the function with the concept, but this is not something you have to do when assessing the concept. Consider it like this: I deny the criteria that conceptual engineers have created for concepts (intrinsic properties). But it seems we need similar criterias for functions.

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