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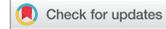
Don't count truth out just yet: a response to Isaac

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ABSTRACT
This paper continues a debate on the normative limits of conceptual
engineering. In particular, it responds to [Isaac, Manuel Gustavo. 2021. "Post-
truth conceptual engineering." Inquiry. doi:10.1080/0020174X.2021.1887758]
claim, in response to [Simion, Mona. 2018a. "The 'Should' in Conceptual
Engineering." Inquiry 61(8): 914–928 and Podosky, Paul-Mikhail Catapang.
2018. "Ideology and Normativity: Constraints on Conceptual Engineering."
Inquiry. doi:10.1080/0020174X.2018.1562374], but in particular Podosky, that
cognitive efficacy, rather than truth and knowledge, should be the normative
standard by which we assess the legitimacy of a conceptual engineering
project – at least for ideological concepts. I argue that Isaac has not done
enough to show us that truth and knowledge are insignificant for the
conceptual engineering of ideological concepts.

1. Introduction

By now we all probably have somewhat of a grip on the nature of conceptual
engineering: a method of evaluating and improving our conceptual reper-
toire. Of course, there are points of contestation. This paper continues a
debate on one point of contestation regarding the limits of conceptual
engineering. Specifically, it responds to Manuel Gustavo Isaac's (2021)
claim, in response to Simion (2018a) and Podosky (2018), but *in particular*,
Podosky, that cognitive efficacy, rather than truth and knowledge, should
be the normative standard by which we assess the legitimacy of a conceptual
engineering project – at least for ideological concepts.

In brief, this paper argues that Isaac has not done enough to show us
that truth and knowledge are insignificant for the conceptual engineering
of ideological concepts. This is for three reasons. First, much of Isaac's

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argument hinges on accepting a particular view about the concept of representation that isn't sufficiently motivated. Second, Isaac is committed to the idea that, when it comes to ideological concepts, truth and power can be separated. I argue that many ideological concepts are powerful, to a significant extent, *because* they are accurate. Moreover, when it comes to implementing an ameliorative proposal, truth acts as the default justification that helps stabilize our social relations – and this is important for justice-oriented conceptual engineering. Finally, Isaac does not tell us how to interpret existing debates about important social kind concepts, such as those surrounding race and gender, that on face value look distinctively concerned with whether such concepts are, justly or unjustly, accurate.

Note: Like Isaac, I will take 'truth'-talk to be rather informal, and captured, at least roughly, by a correspondence theory of truth. Such a theory takes truth to 'hold in the correspondence of a bearer (e.g. beliefs, mental representations, etc.) to some external item (e.g. object facts, state of affairs, etc.) that makes the bearer true' (Isaac 2021, 7).

2. Normative limits

I want to move quickly onto my responses to Isaac, so I will only briefly summarize the history of the debate on the normative limits of conceptual engineering.

Mona Simion (2018a)[1] has argued that the core function of a concept, which is a constituent of our mental lives, is to accurately represent how things are in the world. This, according to Simion, entails that conceptual engineering projects are epistemically constrained in what they are able to achieve – whether for fixing deficiencies or implementing improvements. Put differently, truth or accuracy is the primary arbiter of which proposed revisions to our conceptual repertoire are in fact legitimate. There should be no epistemic loss. This constraint on conceptual engineering is captured most clearly in an example offered by Simion:

> Say that, through some weird causal chain, engineering our concept [of deer] in use so as to exclude red deer would improve the life expectancy of bumblebees, which, given that bumblebees pollinate crops, would, in turn, result in economic advantages. Should we exclude the most common type of deer from the extension of 'deer' on these ground? Should we take on the epistemic loss? Intuitively, this does not seem right. (2018a, 921)

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[1]Simion offers a similar argument in her (2018b) paper titled, 'Epistemic Trouble for Engineering 'Woman.''

Podosky ([2018](#)), in response, is not happy with this constraint.[2] He argues that it rules out important projects in conceptual engineering that *aim* at epistemic loss. That is, according to Podosky, some epistemic loss is beneficial in cases where there is a moral, social, or political need. For example, if it turns out that our current concept of food includes in its extension non-human animals, or at least some of them, then justice for non-human animals would require that we revise FOOD in a way that excludes non-human animals. As we can see, this follows the same kind of reasoning that Simion finds objectionable in her example: there appears to be epistemic loss.

Despite this loss, Podosky argues that this doesn't transgress reasonable epistemic standards. Why? The story goes as follows. Following Haslanger ([2012](#)), Podosky argues that social kind concepts, at least some of them, partly constitute social reality. We needn't get into the details of this. Suffice it to say that particular social kind concepts shape our choice architecture, which plays a role in undergirding our social behavior. Subsequently, social kind concepts, through framing possibilities for action, causally bring about a particular world through repeated social practices. Thus, such concepts partly constitute social reality. And, because of this, such concepts accurately represent the world – they helped create it, after all. So, when a new concept is introduced, its self-reinforcing mechanism means that even if it is inaccurate for a period of time, it will eventually make itself accurate in the long run (provided that things go right). This epistemic loss, according to Podosky, is permissible *because* it is, in principle, temporary.[3]

Here's where Isaac fits in. He says that when it comes to ideology, namely the set of concepts responsible for undergirding *unjust* social practices, 'epistemic standards are ill-suited, if not wholly irrelevant, for determining all-around the legitimacy of ameliorative conceptual engineering projects' ([2021](#), 2).[4] This is for a number of different reasons. I'll outline two. Moreover, I will discuss Isaac's claim that rejecting epistemic

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[2]It should be said that Robin McKenna ([2018](#)) also disagrees with Simion for similar reasons. He says that, at least some ideological concepts, such as gender concepts, is 'not (merely) to represent the world but to shape it' ([2018](#), 335).

[3]Whereas epistemic loss that is not temporary is impermissible, according to Podosky ([2018](#)).

[4]It's not easy to pin down Isaac's overall claim. Sometimes he says, 'traditional epistemic standards are ill-suited, if not wholly irrelevant' ([2021](#), 2), or 'cognitive efficacy should replace truth and knowledge' ([2021](#), 2), and other times he says 'truth and knowledge are not *by themselves* well-suited' ([2021](#), 13 my emphasis). Here we can see differences in the way he presents the strength of his position. What I will say isn't be sensitive to any way that one (reasonably) interprets Isaac's overall position. All I wish to defend is the idea that truth and knowledge have a significant role to play in the conceptual engineering of ideological concepts, and this significance is not fully appreciated by Isaac.

standards for conceptual engineering is not a problem when it comes to the concepts that are a part of our everyday lives.

2.1. Representation

Isaac argues that according to social constructionist takes on ideology, such as explicated by Haslanger (2012), ideologies are 'self-fulfilling in the sense that the concept which they are made of are somehow endowed with the performative power to shape, or at least to contribute to the shaping of, the social reality they are about when they are enacted into social practices and relations' (2021, 6). It should be noted that the 'somehow' mentioned by Isaac is not mysterious. As mentioned above, ideological concepts, like many social kind concepts more broadly, shape our understanding of the world, and constrain what we see as possibilities for intentional action. For instance, an ordinary person's concept of food allows them to see particular non-human animals *as* food and not others (e.g. cows opposed to dogs in Western cultures). This has consequences for behavior – people, in particular contexts, will eat cows rather than dogs (and will take delight when doing so, and feel disgusted at the thought of eating dogs, etc.).

For Isaac, the self-fulfilling nature of concepts, or at least social kind concepts, means that they do not fit with our basic or commonsense understanding of *representation*. What is implicit in this understanding, says Isaac, is that it 'critically require[s] both the independence and prevalence of what is represented (viz., reality) from/over what is representing it (viz., concepts)' (2021, 7). What does this mean for ideological concepts? Well, remember 'ideological social reality results from and depends on its ideological constitution by ideological concepts, at least in part' and if we're willing to accept the criteria of representation that Isaac offers, then 'ideological concepts cannot *represent* the social reality they constitute (precisely because they constitute it)' (2021, 7). Here is where it all comes to a head: if social kind concepts do not represent social reality, in the sense that Isaac puts forward, then projects such as Podosky's make very little sense – we shouldn't talk about the accuracy of concepts when discerning the normative limits of conceptual engineering.

It should be noted that Isaac leaves justification for this commonsense understanding of representation to intuition, and even says that if this distinction is not captured in our concept of representation, then, as a matter of conceptual engineering, it should be replaced (2021, 12–13).

2.2. Power vs. truth

From the foregoing thoughts, Isaac mounts his next argument. He argues that when we give up the representationalist picture, we can rethink the performative power of social kind concepts. That is,

> … when we aim at changing some ideological concepts, these are not, and shouldn't be taken as being, *truthful*, in the sense of being accurately representing an independent social reality; rather they are *powerful*, and should be taken as such, that is, as having succeeded to shape reality so that it fulfils them; and what we want, or rather, what we should aim at, is to overthrow their power, not to debate over the representational accuracy. (2021, 8)

Here Isaac is arguing that Podosky has his sights on the wrong target. While Podosky, according to Isaac, is concerned with accuracy or truth, he really should have just been interested in the power that social kind concepts have to *shape* reality. The goal, then, is not to make pernicious accurate concepts false, but rather to overthrow the stranglehold that concepts have on our everyday lives.

Isaac illuminates this point with an example. He says that when gay rights activists resist dominant understandings of homosexuality with the phrase 'Born this way,' they are not attempting to convey truths about the nature of same-sex attraction. Instead, according to Isaac, they are expressing gay pride for the purposes of claiming certain entitlements (2021, 8; Catalamessa 2019). So, for ideological concepts, Isaac says that '[i]deology … is not a matter of truth, but of power – that is the power of shaping social reality. And, on those grounds, traditional epistemic standards … appear to be utterly ill-suited, if not merely irrelevant in order to make sense of ideological concepts' (2021, 8).

2.3. Concepts in our everyday lives

So, is giving up on epistemic standards for conceptual engineering a bad thing? According to Isaac, the answer is 'No.' Part of the reason, he argues, is that 'very few of the concepts that we use in our everyday life and which may turn to be of concern to conceptual engineering will happen to be.. primarily or ultimately driven by alethic purposes, and thus primarily or ultimately responsive to epistemic standards' (2021, 8). Put differently, in contrast to Podosky, and even Simion, Isaac thinks that the concepts that matter to us, the ones that shape our understanding of self and others, and which undergird or impact how we interact with the world around us, are not truth-driven. Thus, epistemic standards won't apply.

Isaac goes on to offer new normative standards that still appeal to a notion of function, but rather than being representational, a function is the role a concept plays in the cognitive processes that underlie higher-order cognition. The basic gist is that we can assess a concept based on efficacy: how well it fulfills its function of enabling an agent to undertake a particular cognitive task (2021, 10). I will leave this untouched. My purpose in this paper is not to reject Isaac's positive proposal, but rather the steps he takes to get there.

3. Objections

This section will respond to the claims made by Isaac listed in §2. I will address each in turn.

3.1. Representation?

Isaac tells us that because ideological concepts shape social reality, at least in part, then they do not meet the implicit criteria for representation, which is ontological independence and prevalence of what is represented from what is representing. Presumably this point generalizes to all concepts that are involved in the construction of social reality. It is hard to see why not – it doesn't seem that injustice should make the difference between a concept being representational or otherwise. Thus, *any* concept that is implicated in the processes that give rise to social structure mustn't be representational on Isaac's account. But is this right?

I take it that Isaac is not advocating for a wholesale dismissal of representationalism – rather, he is simply telling us how to distinguish between those concepts that are representational, from those that are not. And this distinction depends on their relationship to the world: if they partly constitute reality, then they are not representational. Or so the story goes.

As mentioned, Isaac leaves justification for thinking about representation in this way to intuition. However, with the right examples, it seems that intuition can swing us the other way. Take cars. Following social constructionist accounts, it seems that cars, despite their material constitution, are also constituted, in part, by a social kind concept, or a cluster of social kind concepts. After all, our ordinary concept of car allows us to interpret an organized arrangement of metal and plastic as something that can be used as a means of transportation. In the absence of such a concept, at least intuitively, it would not be a car – perhaps with another concept, it would be a purely decorative item or

a piece of art. Sally Haslanger (2012) uses dogs to show us how our interpretive devices shape our understanding: across contexts, given the prevailing concepts, dogs will be either pets, pests, or food. That is, what dogs *are* is dependent on the concepts that are operative in a context.

Do the foregoing examples show that our concept of car or dog is not representational? I don't think the answer is obvious. Intuitively, or at least my intuitions, it seems perfectly reasonable to think of the concept of car as representing *cars* – even though the concept helped create and constitute the object. The same goes for dogs. So, what do we do with these conflicting intuitions?

It is unclear why we should accept Isaac's stipulated criteria for distinguishing between concepts that are representational from those that aren't when they rub up against our intuitions about certain cases. Let me be clear: I am not saying that Isaac is wrong. What I am saying is that Isaac hasn't done enough to show us that he has successfully distinguished between concepts that are representational from those that aren't, *rather* than just showing us that concepts can come to represent the world in different ways – after all, I could just draw a different distinction than Isaac by saying that social kind concepts are *dependently* representational, and non-social kind concepts, perhaps natural kind concepts, are *independently* representational. Here, the distinction is made *assuming* a representationalist understanding of concept. Put differently, more is needed from Isaac to motivate the idea that representationalism requires independence and prevalence – at least in the way that he understands it.

A further thought is that it is not clear what kind of independence Isaac has in mind. Under a particular interpretation, independence seems to be preserved despite the constitutive relationship between concept and object. If a concept, to be representational, must represent an independent social reality *in the sense* that there must be a clear enough cut-off point between a representational device and the object that it represents, then this, it seems to me, can be seen with social kind concepts. Yes, social kind concepts do partly constitute the world. But they also stand alone as independent aspects of the world. That is, we can, as evident in our discussion, distinguish between a social kind concept and the thing that it represents. The concept of dog is different and has a separate existence from dogs. It is not unlike saying that the clay that constitutes a statue has an independent existence from the statue itself. So, it seems that Isaac owes us a notion of independence that would enable him to

clearly distinguish between concepts that are representational from those that aren't.

3.2. *Truth* is *power*

Let's put the question of representation to the side. Isaac might still be right that rather than focusing on ideological concepts being truthful, or accurately representing the world, we should instead concern ourselves primarily with the *power* that such concepts have in shaping social reality.

What I want to put pressure on is Isaac's somewhat explicit distinction between power and truth. My position is that, when it comes to social relations, truth *is* power – at least much of the time. And this can be seen when we look beyond the idea that concepts *shape* social reality. Shaping is just one means by which power is exercised or instantiated. But it is not the only means. Power is also evident and present in the *maintenance* of the status quo. Ideological concepts do not just come about, but rather they are robust, sticky, and hard to dislodge. And this stabilizes unjust social practices, and stifles progress. Now the question is, what makes such concepts rather impervious to change?

There are all sorts of mechanisms that play the role of keeping things conceptually as they are. However, one such mechanism is the default justification given to concepts *because* they are accurate. Truth brings with it a particular standing in the social world. Consider an example. When animal rights activists make first-order statements, as a matter of resisting unjust social structure, such as 'Animals are friends, not food,' it is very easy for someone to say in response, 'Well, that's not right. Look around you; of course animals are food.' And there is a significant bite to this retort: it is *true* that animals are food; they are a part of our cultural eating practices, embedded in institutions of buying, selling, and consuming, and the centerpiece of many of our eating traditions.

If Isaac is right that accuracy isn't of primary importance, then it is difficult to make sense of why the claim that animals are food, with a pointed gesture to the world, is a reasonable and pressing response to someone who says otherwise. Moreover, it appears that the most appropriate response from the activist isn't something like 'We're not trying to convey truths about the world, we're just advocating for certain rights,' but rather 'Yes, that's true, but animals *shouldn't* be food.' Importantly, this is an admission that the concept of food that they are endorsing is inaccurate, but that it ought to be the operative one.

My hope in bringing to light this example is to show that truth is powerful. It gets in the way of our efforts to realize justice by safeguarding extant concepts from attempts at revision. But there is also a positive upshot. Conceptual engineering, during the implementation stage, should want to achieve truth or accuracy. We should want the world to conform to the concepts we bring to it *because this stabilizes social relations.* That is, the accuracy of a concept serves as default justification for keeping that concept around. And when concepts are good, then we should want them to be preserved. Truth can help achieve this.

3.3. Our concepts appear truth-driven

The final thing that I want to discuss is Isaac's claim that 'very few of the concepts that we use in our everyday life and which may turn to be of concern to conceptual engineering will happen to be … primarily or ultimately driven by alethic purposes, and thus primarily or ultimately responsive to epistemic standards' (2021, 8).

Isaac might be right that very few concepts in our everyday lives will be driven by alethic reasons. But this doesn't seem to be the point. Conceptual engineering isn't a numbers game. Rather, we should ask: Are any of the most significant concepts in our lives, and which play a substantive role in structuring our social relations, truth-related?

The answer seems to lean in favor of, 'Yes.' Isaac seems to be forgetting the kinds of concepts that kick-started contemporary investigation into the limits of conceptual engineering: race and gender concepts. What we have seen are different ways of construing what race and gender are, and what they should be. One debate is whether our current concept of women is trans* inclusive, and if it isn't, what it would take for such a concept to be trans* inclusive (e.g. Haslanger 2000; Jenkins 2016; Barnes 2019; Dembroff 2020). After all, given the pernicious and awfully unjust world that we live in, it is by no means settled that the concept includes trans* women in its extension. Here, it is hard not to see this concern as a matter of truth or knowledge. We want to work out whether our ordinary concept of women represents trans* women or not. And if it turns out that it doesn't, perhaps constituting a variety of injustices,[5] then our ameliorative efforts should be directed toward bringing about a world in which our concept of woman is trans* inclusive

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[5]For example: hermeneutical injustice (Fricker 2007), ontological injustice (Dembroff 2020), ontic injustice (Jenkins 2020), etc.

and resolves such injustices. That is, we should take steps to revise our concept of women to represent trans* women.

So, what's my objection? Given that Isaac has rejected a representationalist view about the conceptual engineering of social kind concepts, one that focuses on accuracy and truth, then it seems that he owes us, at least, one of two things. First, because existing debates on race and gender appear to be framed as a matter of what our concepts actually represent, and what they should represent, then Isaac should tell us why such debates are misguided. After all, race and gender concepts play a substantive role in creating and constituting social facts, and therefore they are not representational on Isaac's account. Second, if Isaac thinks that such debates are not misguided, then it seems that he owes us a reinterpretation of the debates that aren't about conceptual accuracy.

Of course, Isaac can make a similar move to his example of what gay rights activists are doing when they say 'Born this way.' That is, Isaac might say that those interested in the amelioration of race and gender are not concerned with truths about the world, but rather just making certain entitlement claims. But this doesn't feel adequate. In particular, it seems that when theorists discuss certain wrongs associated with the exclusivity of our gender concepts, they are saying something about why it is bad that the concept represents what it does – such as Jenkins's (2016) response to Haslanger's (2000) ameliorative analysis of WOMAN that does not include certain trans* people within their identified gender, and that '[f]ailure to respect the gender identification of trans people is a serious harm and is conceptually linked to forms of transphobic oppression and even violence' (2016, 396).

4. Conclusion

Isaac thinks that we should shift our understanding of the normative limits of conceptual engineering, at least for ideological concepts, to an account that focuses on cognitive efficacy. He might well be right about this. However, in this paper I have argued that the steps Isaac takes to get to this position are not yet convincing. Specifically, I have said the following. (i) Isaac needs to motivate his preferred concept of representation in order to maintain the idea that ideological concepts, which partly constitute the world, are not representational; (ii) Isaac is wrong to think that power and truth can be separated because truth plays a substantive role in maintaining the conceptual status quo and stabilizing

social relations; and (iii) Isaac owes us either a reason to think that existing debates on the engineering of race and gender concepts, and social kind concepts more broadly, are misguided; or he owes us a reinterpretation that doesn't cash out those debates in terms of conceptual accuracy.

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