The 'Should' in Conceptual Engineering

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Abstract

Several philosophers have inquired into the metaphysical limits of conceptual engineering: 'Can we engineer? And if so, to what extent?'. This paper is not concerned with answering these questions. It does concern itself, however, with the limits of conceptual engineering, albeit in a largely unexplored sense: it cares about the normative, rather than about the metaphysical limits thereof.

I first defend an optimistic claim: I argue that the ameliorative project has, so far, been too modest; there is little value theoretic reason to restrict the project to remedying deficient representational devices, rather than go on a more ambitious quest: conceptual improvement. That being said, I also identify a limitation to the optimistic claim: I show that the 'should' in ameliorative projects suffers from a 'wrong-kind-of-reasons' problem.

Last but not least, I sketch a proposal of normative constraining meant to address both the above results. The proposal gives primacy to epistemic constraints: accordingly, a concept should be ameliorated only insofar as this does not translate into epistemic loss.

Key Words: conceptual engineering, ameliorative project, epistemic norms, conceptual deficiency

1. Introduction

Several philosophers think that we should set aside our ambition to describe the world and, instead, engage in prescriptive projects: for instance, that we should stop trying to figure out precisely what our concept of knowledge depicts and, instead, work towards answering the question: 'what *should* our concept of knowledge be like?'. According to many of the champions of this prescriptive turn, that is the philosopher's true job to begin with. Here is Matti Eklund, for one:

> [...W]hile philosophers often have been concerned with our actual concepts or the properties or relations they stand for, philosophers should also be asking themselves whether these really are the best tools for understanding the relevant aspects of reality, and in many cases consider what preferable replacements might be. Philosophers should be engaged in conceptual engineering. Compare: when physicists study reality they do not hold on to the concepts of folk physics but use concepts better suited to their theoretical purposes. Why should things stand differently with what philosophers study? (Eklund 2014. 2930)

According to Sally Haslanger, too, we should look into the function of our concepts, and engineer them accordingly:

> […W]e begin by considering more fully the pragmatics of our talk employing the terms in question. What is the point of having these concepts? What cognitive or practical task do they (or should they) enable us to accomplish? Are they effective tools to accomplish our (legitimate) purposes; if not, what concepts would serve these purposes better? (Haslanger 2000, 33)

Now, one central concern for champions of the ameliorative project concerns the metaphysical limits thereof: Can we even get the project off the ground, i.e. can we act on the concepts we have? What strategies are there available for amelioration? Does this not clash fragrantly with any form of semantic externalism? Do we need to change the world in the process? How is the continuity of inquiry and communication going to be affected by this? These are but a few questions any project aiming to engineer our representational devices needs to answer; they all, in a nutshell, amount to asking: 'Can we engineer? And if so, to what extent?'. Several people have asked these questions in the literature, and several people have tried to answer them.[1]

This paper is not concerned with answering these questions. It does

[1] For discussion, see e.g. (Cappelen 2017), (Greenough 2017).

concern itself, however, with the limits of conceptual engineering, albeit in a largely unexplored sense: it looks into the limits of the 'should' involved in the ameliorative project, rather than into the limits of the corresponding 'can'. It cares about the normative, rather than about the metaphysical limits of the engineering project. It asks the following questions: even if we assume that we could engineer representational devices, should we? What is/are the source/s of this normative constraint? What are its limits?

Here is what I will do in what follows: in the next section (#2), I first outline a series of normative sources centrally featured in the conceptual engineering literature. Further on, I defend an optimistic claim: I argue that the ameliorative project has, so far, been too modest; that is, value-theoretically unjustifiably modest. There is little reason, I argue, to restrict the project to remedying deficient representational devices, rather than go on a more ambitious quest: conceptual improvement. That being said, in section #3, I also identify a limitation to the optimistic claim: I show that the 'should' in ameliorative projects suffers from a 'wrong-kind-of-reasons' problem: in a nutshell, it looks as though not just any improvement legitimizes engineering a perfectly consistent, functional concept. If that is the case, though, the ameliorative ambition is in need of normative constraining. In the last section (#4), I put forth a sketch of a proposal to this effect, what I call the 'Epistemic Limiting Procedure' (ELP). The proposal gives primacy to epistemic normative constraints: according to ELP, a concept should be ameliorated only insofar as this does not translate into epistemic loss. In section #5 I answer two objections to the proposed account, and in the last section I conclude.

2. Engineering Good Concepts

Several normative incentives have been put forth in support of conceptual amelioration in the literature. Largely though, they all have one thing in common: they draw their normative force from extant conceptual deficiencies of sorts. Other than that, the reasons to engineer are a type-diverse bunch. Here is Patrick Greenough (2017) on this:

> Conceptual defects are many and varied. Concepts (and terms) can be incomplete ('open-textured'), confused, unsatisfiable, vague, or inconsistent. They can be too inclusive, too narrow, or simply empty. They can be too complex, too simple, or not fit to feature in any useful explanation; they can be superseded, tired, hackneyed, or systematically misapplied. They can be too parochial, too elitist, or too recondite. They can be loaded with inappropriate connotations, bad ideological baggage, or serve as ongoing devices for deceit, discrimination, or oppression. A concept may be flawed on more than one dimension—broken in

> many different ways. Conceptual Engineering, as a result, is a multifarious business (Greenough 2017, 3).

To have some normative picture to start from, it will be very helpful to look at Herman Cappelen's (2017) tentative taxonomy of conceptual deficiencies. After all, it is plausible to think that the relevant types of 'should' involved in the engineering proposals will correspond to the types of deficiencies meant to address. According to Cappelen, on a first approximation, a concept is in need of engineering either when it fails semantically – cases of nonsense, incoherence, inconsistency, maybe even vagueness – or when, even though the concept does not fail semantically, employing it has detrimental effects.

Let us start by taking a closer look at the case of semantic failure. Notably, one central concern of engineers has been with fixing concepts taken to be inconsistent; the concept of 'truth', for instance, is a fashionable target of ameliorative ambitions, due to liar-paradoxicality (see e.g. [Sharp 2013]). The concept of 'freedom' is also pretty popular in the literature on inconsistency counts, due to being taken by many to be incompatible with both determinism and indeterminism (van Inwagen 2008). Arguably, the main deficiencies at stake in these examples are semantic and epistemic deficiencies; the concepts fail us semantically and, thereby, are likely to be conducive to obstacles in inquiry. Plausibly, the corresponding 'should-s' in the engineering proposals will follow suit: we will have semantic and epistemic reasons justifying our ameliorative proposals.

There are also more practical concerns that the engineering ambition aims to address. Concepts can be semantically innocent, but have detrimental effects in other walks of life. These non-semantic detrimental effects able to justify amelioration are a diverse bunch; Cappelen identifies three broad categories: first, there are *morally, politically or socially detrimental effects*. For instance, the fact that 'marriage' has an extension that excludes same-sex couples has such bad effects. Similarly, according to Sally Haslanger, engineering our current concept of 'woman' would be good for political reasons. More specifically, Haslanger's political goal is the elimination of women: '[…] I believe it is part of the project of feminism to bring about a day when there are no more women' (Haslanger 2000, 46).

Crucially, in the case of social and political effects, according to Cappelen, one can be metaphysically justified to attempt amelioration, in virtue of the fact that the extensions of terms are taken to be constitutive of social reality. On Searle's view, for instance, '[...] language is essentially constitutive of institutional reality. […It is] impossible to have institutional structures such as money, marriage, governments, and property without some form of language because [...] the words or other symbols are partly constitutive of the facts' (Searle 1995, 59). Thus, on such a view of social reality, one can have moral, social, political reasons to engineer the relevant concepts pertaining to deficiencies present at the level of the relevant institutions.

However, this need not be the case: even if you don't think meanings of words are constitutive of social reality, you can still be justified in engineering if, as a matter of empirical fact, the divisions and classifications we make will have very significant social effects.

Second, according to some philosophers, the use of certain kinds of expressions might have a negative *cognitive effect* on those using those expressions (Sarah Jane Leslie, forthcoming)). The expressions Leslie discusses are generics – for instance 'muslims', or 'african americans' -, and the mistake is that of essentializing social kinds, i.e. enhance the extent to which people expect the individual to conform to a stereotype.

Thirdly, there are *effects on theorizing*: According to Clark and Chalmers (1998), for instance, we have a notion of belief that is too internalist and thus blocks the extended mind hypothesis and makes it hard to develop a systematic theory of the mind; there's nothing semantically wrong with the non-externalist notion, but using it is likely to result in a non-unified theory.

Now, this tentative taxonomy need not, of course, cover all the possible justificatory reasons for proposing engineering; rather, it offers a very useful map of extant attempts and their normative resources. The reason why it is useful to look at it is because it enables us to see interesting patterns pertaining to the normativity at work.

First, we have seen that, one plausible way to identify the 'should(s)' at stake in a particular engineering proposal is by looking at the targeted deficiencies: defects of a particular type T will be associated with justifications of type T; epistemic deficiencies will correspond to an epistemic justification for amelioration; moral defects suggest an associated moral 'should' and so on. The type association seems overwhelmingly plausible and nicely maps on to the way in which the general normative landscape seems to work: if I have a false belief, for instance, my belief is epistemically deficient, so the 'should' involved in my obligation to abandon or revise it is an epistemic 'should'. Similarly, a broken speedometer is prudentially (and legally) deficient, so there's a prudential (and legal) 'should' at stake in my obligation to fix it.

One aspect of this association between 'defects of type T' and "should-s' of type T', however, that does not come across as equally value theoretically innocent is the following idea that seems to implicitly underlie the extant ameliorative projects: defects of type T are *needed* for justifications of type T. That is, if we look at the taxonomy above, we will notice that it is built around the type of defect at stake: champions of various engineering proposals start with identifying a (morally, epistemically etc.) deficient concept, and then propose that we should revise it in one way or another. Finally, the engineer argues that the proposed revision will have this or that (morally, epistemically etc.) good consequence.

It is here, however, where the engineering normative picture does not seem to fit that well with general normativity: on most normative pictures in the literature, for all phi, what T-justifies phi-ing is a T-type improvement, not a T-type defect. If it's morally better for me to give money to charity than to

not give money to charity, than I am justified in giving money to charity. It need not be that I am thereby remedying some moral defect. If it is prudentially better that I go to Mary's party tonight, than I am prudentially justified in going to Mary's party tonight.

If that is the case, however, it is less than clear why engineers have been modestly restricting ameliorative ambitions to fixing language, rather than improving language. After all, say that there was nothing wrong with our concept of 'woman', semantically, morally, politically or otherwise; say that it is a perfectly coherent concept, and its current shape has zero detrimental effects on women's moral, political or epistemic life. Say, however, that it could be engineered such as to substantially improve women's life. Should we not attempt to do so? To see this more clearly, think also of a closely related branch of engineering, i.e. social engineering: do we need our social institutions to be somehow deficient in order to be justified in proposing amelioration projects, or is it enough if changing our social institutions will have a positive effect on our lives?[2]

The upshot of this is a fairly optimistic picture concerning the normative limits of the engineering project: we should broaden up! Conceptual engineering need not merely draw its normative support from defects of our representational devices; proposals of improvement for perfectly functional concepts will do just as well.

Note, also, crucially, that all this is not to say that the said authors would not happily embrace this wider picture;[3] to the contrary, I would expect both champions and foes of conceptual engineering to agree that, if we are justified and/or able to engineer at all, there is little to no reason to think that the modest, 'mere fixing' project, enjoys more justificatory support than the wider picture here proposed.

3. The Wrong Kind of Reasons for Amelioration

We have seen that there is little normative reason for engineering projects to stay modest: improving good concepts is just as well supported by the extant arguments in favor of the engineering ambition as is fixing deficient ones. If we care about the consequences of employing a particular concept for our moral, social, political, cognitive etc. life, we are just as justified in avoiding bad consequences as we are in seeking better ones. Or so the rest of the normative landscape seems to suggest.

What I will argue next, however, is that broadening up from fixing

[2] Of course, strictly speaking, T-justification does not supervene on T-obligation, but rather on T-permissibility. The question, however, remains: why is the conceptual engineer is in the business of ameliorating concepts that are in *need* of amelioration, rather than ameliorating concepts that *can* be ameliorated.

[3] Cappelen and Greenough (pc) confirmed as much.

language to conceptual improvement also reveals[4] one important value-theoretic obstacle in the engineer's way: a wrong-kind-of-reasons problem.

To see this, note, first, that at the core of Cappelen's taxonomy lies a distinction between semantic and non-semantic deficiencies. Now, of course, this need not be a sharp distinction, and in most cases it will not be so: likely, in most cases, we will only care about semantic deficiencies to begin with *because* of other types of detrimental effects they generate. For instance, likely, if van Inwagen is right and the concept of freedom is, indeed, inconsistent, this will have great potential for generating detrimental effects on theorizing with the concept of freedom.

I will come back to this later in the paper; for now, let us leave this complication aside, however, because it will not affect the discussion to follow in any way. For the purposes of this section, then, I will take the semantic/non-semantic deficiency distinction to be sharp. One interesting question that this distinction gives rise to is: how will these two core normative sources going to interact? Which will take primacy? The semantic or the non-semantic 'should'? While not strictly speaking implying it,[5] Cappelen's taxonomy seems to sugegest the answer is: 'the latter'. After all, the thought is that, even though a concept is semantically non-deficient, it might still be the proper target of the engineer in virtue of its detrimental moral, political etc. effects. Even if, say, our current concept of 'woman' is semantically perfectly functional, in virtue of the unfortunate social effects it bears, we are justified in proposing amelioration.

Here is one first worry with this: what if the concept at stake is, as a matter of fact, not only semantically perfectly fine, but also does exceptionally well epistemically, i.e. it carves nature at its joints, while, at the same time, we find that employing it has bad practical consequences? Concepts of species are the most straightforward illustration: take our concept of 'deer', for instance; it includes fallow deer, red deer, roe deer and muntjac deer. Say that it turns out that, in its current shape, it has terrible effects for the roe deer population. While not strictly speaking endangered, roe deer population is particularly vulnerable: up to 90 per cent die during their first year, due to heavy predation on fawns by foxes and by lynx in mainland Europe. Starvation and respiratory infections also take their toll. Now, say that, in virtue of this increased vulnerability, the fact that roe deer falls under the concept 'deer' has further terrible effects on the population: since, for instance, neither hunting nor protection legislation discriminates between roe deer and less vulnerable deer populations, roe deer is more likely to be hunted down, and less likely to be subject to protective measures. Does this justify revising our concept of deer? Should we be responsive to the moral and political factors and abandon a

[4] Importantly, the said obstacle is merely revealed rather than triggered by the broader project. See below.

[5] Since it only discusses cases of practical deficiencies in absence of semantic deficiencies, Cappelen's framework is perfectly compatible with it being the case that, whenever there are semantic deficiencies, they will take precedence.

perfectly functional concept, which, by stipulation, carves nature at its biological joints? Think, for instance, of all the epistemic work that such a concept can do for us, and which will be lost after moral amelioration.

Say that you are still inclined to believe the answer to this question is 'yes, we should revise!'. After all, arguably, moral permissibility is all-things-considered permissibility: when different normative considerations come in conflict, moral reasons prevail. Even so, the worry runs even deeper: say this paper is right, and reasons speaking in favor of fixing our representational devices equally support improving them. That is, our reasons for engineering need not be restricted to deficiencies. Will it then be the case that that we are justified in engineering a perfectly functional concept for *just any* improvement that might be triggered by this effort? What are the restrictions – if any – to abandoning a semantically impeccable, joint-carving, practically non-deficient concept?

Take, for instance, again, the concept of 'deer'. Say that, through some weird causal chain, engineering our concept 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 counts? Should we take on the epistemic loss? Intuitively, this does not seem right.

What this discussion reveals is a wrong-kind-of-reasons problem for the 'should' in conceptual engineering: not just any practical/moral/political etc. gain seems to do the work in justifying ameliorating an epistemically good concept. If the conceptual engineering programme is likely to leave us with concepts that fail us epistemically, devoid of representational devices that we can employ in exploring the world around us, then maybe we should set our engineering ambitions aside. What the programme needs is a normative limiting recipe. Taking its cue from the literature on the wrong-kind-of-reasons problem for deontological accounts of value, the next section concerns itself precisely with sketching one such tool.

4. Epistemic Limits

In the previous sections, I have argued that, at a closer value-theoretic glance, the conceptual engineering project should be both wider and narrower than extant proposals in the literature suggest. On one hand, the arguments put forth to justify fixing language equally support improving non-deficient representational devices. That's the good news: the project can be broadened up. On the other hand, I have identified a wrong-kind-of-reasons problem for the said justificatory efforts: not just any improvement seems to have the necessary normative strength to support the ameliorative ambition.

To figure out how to distinguish between 'the right kind' and 'the wrong kind' of conceptual improvement, it will be useful to take a closer look

in in the literature on the wrong-kind-of-reasons problem. In a nutshell, a reason is said to be 'of the wrong kind' when, although it counts as a consideration broadly in favor of phi-ing, it fails to bear on whether phi-ing is valuable. To say that something is a wrong kind of reason, however, is not to say that it is a bad reason: some reasons of the wrong kind seem to provide excellent support for phi-ing, while still failing to render phi-ing into a valuable action or attitude. The central case in recent literature involves a demon that credibly threatens to punish you unless you desire or admire something X that, quite obviously, is not desirable or admirable. When the incentive is compelling enough, it apparently provides conclusive all-things-considered reason to believe, desire or admire X, if you can; but it is not a reason that shows *X* to be true, good or admirable. The fact that a demon will punish you unless you desire a cup of mud is the wrong kind of reason to desire the mud, since such an exogenous incentive obviously does not make the mud desirable (Crisp 2000).

Another classical example features reasons for belief: if you offer me one million dollars for believing against all available evidence that you are not bald, I have conclusive, all-things-considered justification to believe that you are not bald. However, in virtue of failing to be epistemically justified to believe it, my corresponding belief is a bad belief, which, intuitively, I shouldn't even be able to form to begin with. Prudential reasons are the wrong kind of reasons for belief, no matter what is all-things-considered required at the context.

One observation that is frequently made in the relevant literature is that reasons of the wrong kind do not pertain to the kind of thing the action/attitude in question *is*, to its central function. Belief, for instance, is a mental state the central function of which is an epistemic one: representing the world. As such, in virtue of this function, beliefs will be properly functioning when responsive to reasons that bear on this function, i.e. on epistemic reasons (see, e.g. [Simion 2017], [Graham 2012]). In virtue of their function of representing the world rather than, say, generating pleasure, beliefs will be malfunctioning when responsive to prudential rather than epistemic reasons, no matter what the all-things-considered contextual requirement is. If I know that you are bold in virtue of the fact that I can see it with my own eyes, I should not revise my belief due to moral, prudential or political concerns.

The above distinction nicely maps on to the difference between predicative and attributive uses of 'good'. Predicative uses refer to good for one purpose or another,[6] and thus latch on to all-things-considered obligations; in contrast, the attributive usage stands for what it takes for a token of a particular type to be good with regard to its type. Like in 'a good hospital is a clean hospital', or 'a good knife is sharp' or 'good driving is safe driving' (Geach 1956). In attributive usage, 'good' functions as a predicate modifier,

[6] For those who believe in its existence as a sui generis type of goodness, also to good *simpliciter*.

rather than as a predicate in its own right. When we say that good knives are sharp, we say that knives *qua knives* are good only if they are sharp, no matter whether, at the context, blunt knives would be all-things-considered better to have. The fact that good knives qua knives are sharp knives need not entail that good knives are good for the contextually salient purpose.

Importantly, this is not to say that attributive goodness does not trigger genuine ought-s. On the contrary, there is a clear sense in which hospitals ought to be clean, knives ought to be sharp and driving ought to be safe. Of course, this is still very vague, and further specification will likely result in value theoretical controversies. Fortunately, for our purposes here, these rough lines are all we need. The thought is, on a first approximation, that just in the way in which prudential, moral, political etc. considerations are the wrong kind of reasons for knowledgeable belief revision, they equally fail to support conceptual revision when the concept at stake is epistemically good, i.e. good as a concept. If our concept of 'deer' is epistemicaly perfectly functional and carves nature at its biological joints, moral, political etc. considerations, in isolation, will not be the right kinds of reasons to revise it. Concepts, just like beliefs, are representational devices, their function is an epistemic one: to represent the world. In virtue of this function, concepts will be properly functioning when responsive to epistemic reasons, and malfunctional when responsive to practical reasons. Concepts will be good concepts qua concepts when they are epistamically good.

To sum up: according to the view defended here, not just any improvement legitimizes engineering a perfectly consistent, epistemically functional concept. If that is the case, though, the ameliorative ambition is in need of normative constraining. In the light of the discussion above, here is this paper's proposal to this effect:

The Epistemic Limiting Procedure (ELP): A representational device should be ameliorated iff (1) There is all-things-considered reason to do so and (2) The amelioration does not translate into epistemic loss.

The proposal gives primacy to epistemic normative constraints in setting the normative boundaries for the ameliorative ambition. The resulting picture is wider than extant engineering proposals in the literature suggest, in virtue of not requiring conceptual deficiencies as justifications for amelioration. It is narrower in that it limits the ameliorative ambition to revisions that do not result in epistemic loss. Think of the example of 'deer' again: insofar as, in the process of revising the concept, we do not end up with less knowledge about the world, the engineer is free to proceed with revision for any good practical, moral, political etc. reason. However, no practical, moral, political etc. reason will support conceptual revision that obscures our view of the world. Of course, if the life of millions is at stake, revising a perfectly adequate representational device will be all-things-considered permissible. However, the resulting concept will not be a better concept, in virtue of being less likely to

fulfill its central function; therefore no conceptual improvement will have taken place. The proposal is novel in that it gives primacy to epistemic normative constraints on conceptual engineering. It is, however, in line with many extant views, in placing a heavy normative burden on the functions of the relevant concepts (e.g. [Haslanger 2000], [Plunkett and Sundell 2013]).

5. Objections and Replies

Now, with the proposed account at hand, I will turn to answering two important questions that arise concerning ELP: the first worry concerns the necessity direction involved in ELP, the second the sufficiency direction. If both are right, ELP is both too strong and too weak.

Let us start with the former: one important worry is that the ELP restriction will forbid intuitively worthwhile extant engineering projects. Take, for instance, again, the project of engineering the concept of 'woman'. Again, say that there was nothing wrong with it from an epistemic point of view: it is a perfectly coherent concept, and, in its current shape has zero detrimental epistemic effects. Say, however, that it is morally, socially and politically defective, and it has substantive undesirable consequences for women's lives. Should we not attempt to engineer? This does not seem right.

My answer to this question will lack much in the way of nuance: 'No, we shouldn't!'. Insofar as our concept of woman is epistemically perfectly functional, we should leave it be, for reasons pertaining to success in inquiry. Note, however, that it is not clear that this is an example of epistemically proper but morally deficient concept. More plausibly, I submit, what we have here is a concept that has bad social, moral, political effects *in virtue of* failing epistemically. Our concept is not impeccably depicting what women are, and still triggering bad moral and social outcomes; it does the latter *in virtue of* being epistemically deficient.

Recall that, after looking at Cappelen's taxonomy of ameliorative 'should-s', we noted that the distinction between theoretical and practical deficiencies, and the corresponding normative concerns justifying the engineering project, need not be as sharp as the taxonomy suggested: likely, most practical deficiencies will be sourced in epistemic deficiencies. Highly plausibly, also, we will only care about epistemic deficiencies to begin with because they tend to have bad moral, social, political etc. effects. ELP restricts the justifcatory field for the ameliorative project to just this (arguably) majority of cases: cases of practical failure in virtue of epistemic failure. It is arguable that the projects put forth in the literature belong here.

One slightly different incarnation of the worry would go along the following lines: it is not fair play to ask whether we should take on a new concept, and for what reasons, without specifying what use-context we're asking about. Take 'deer' again: if the context of interest is biology, then it might be quite obvious that epistemic goals take primacy. If it's policy making,

then it might be equally obvious that practical goals take primacy. It need not be that, if we change concepts in one context, then we have to change them in all others: we could keep the joint carving concept in use in the context of biology where it underwrites scientifically significant generalizations, and introduce alternative concepts in the context of (say) environmental policy making, where biological joints matter, but less so and not exclusively, and where the practical benefits of the alternative concept can be gained.[7]

Three things about this: first, it is not clear that going context-variant will help to remove the impropriety-in-spite-of-all-things-considered-propriety intuition discussed above. Think back to the (arguably) parallel case of belief: it might be that, for the purposes of one context or another, it is better to believe what one is prudentially justified to believe. For instance, in the case of patients with very serious conditions, there is empirical research strongly suggesting that wishful thinking can prolong life expectancy. Still, there remains an intuitively important sense in which beliefs formed as a result of wishful thinking are defective beliefs. The functionalist picture serves to explain this.

Second, going context relative might just push the problem at the level of a particular context, rather than solve it. The worry is that contextualism might not help much with the wrong-kind-of-reasons problem to begin with, since it looks as though it can reappear within context. After all, there is, plausibly, no such thing as inquiry-free domain. If that is true, we could have, it would seem, within the same context, conflicting epistemic and, say, moral considerations, at which point the same argument can be generated.

Last, it is not clear to what extent merely using a different concept in a restricted context would count as successful engineering to begin with. Something more seems to be needed: just because I and my family decide to use 'deer' to mean 'cup of tea' from now on, because that fits some family purpose or another, we surely do not count as having engineered the concept of 'deer'. Note also that several authors offer examples of distinctively failed engineering projects where this is exactly what is going on: one body or another decides that concept x should be redefined as y in a particular context; Patrick Greenough (2017), for instance, brings up failed semantic engineering in totalitarian regimes in order to argue for their being such a thing as a 'control problem' for engineering projects: even if, for fear of persecution, people start employing the concept at stake as indicated in the relevant context, it still does not seem as though that is a successful engineering attempt. What seems to be needed for intuitive engineering success, rather, is a wider, more substantive, wide soread change than that.

Of course, the fact that the threshold for successful engineering cannot plausibly be as low as the teacup case would have it, does not imply it will be maximally high. Nothing I have just said precludes there being a plausible a contextually variant alternative to the view defended here, together with a

[7] Manny thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

plausible proposal for a success threshold; of course, though, it will be on the shoulders of its champion to put such a proposal forth and to dispel the worries I have just laid out.

A different but very serious worry that arises about ELP is that it is too weak, in that it allows too many ameliorative projects in. To see this, recall that we have seen that some endorse a view on which language is constitutive of social reality (e.g. Searle 1995). If that is the case, when it comes to concepts representing social rather than natural kinds, by conceptually engineering, we would be, in effect, changing the world. If our language is constitutive of social reality, conceptual engineering will amount to a form of social engineering.

Note that, in this case, by ELP, anything goes: after all, since as soon as one engineers a social kind concept, reality follows suit, it is unlikely to ever get epistemic deficiencies. As such, by ELP, any type and extent of improvement, no matter how marginal or limited, justifies an ameliorative project. Isn't this, however, dangerously permissive? Should we, for instance, go ahead and engineer both the concept and the social institution of 'money' just for some minor positive effect this might have, say, on the price of tomatoes in New York?

Again, the answer is hardly nuanced: 'Yes, we should'. I take this to be a feature of the account, not a defect. Of course, importantly, absent any central, epistemic concerns, the entire normative picture needs to be taken into consideration: we should carefully weigh all the normative constraints present at the context against each other: 0ne should not engineer for the sake of the New York tomatoes market, if this results in poverty in three small countries. Furthermore, importantly, one central consideration to be taken into consideration will be the opportunity cost of engaging in engineering and proliferating the use of the engineered concept. But if, absent epistemic concerns, the all-things-considered normative requirement is to improve a particular social kind concept, than this is exactly what we should do.

6. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to break new ground in the research concerned with the limitations of conceptual engineering: rather than looking into the metaphysical limits of ameliorative projects, it concerned itself with the normative limits thereof. In the process, I have identified one broadening up opportunity for the engineer, but also a wrong-kind-of-reasons problem. In the light of all this, I put forth a sketch of a proposal for normative constraining that gives primacy to epistemic requirements.

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