

Philosophy 454/554: Conceptual Engineering
Fall 2024

The conceptual engineering movement in philosophy is relatively new—as a self-conscious metaphilosophical movement about what philosophers should be doing it is not even ten years old. What is this movement? It stands in contrast to the more traditional idea that philosophers should engage in conceptual analysis, a more or less entirely armchair exercise of attempting to clarify concepts by laying out necessary and sufficient conditions for a thing's falling under (being in the extension of) the concept. One problem with conceptual analysis is that, given its track record, it's proven to be a better tool for knowing what a concept is not rather than what it is. There always seems to be a counterexample to every analysis. But the more salient concern for conceptual engineers is that even a correct analysis merely describes what it is that falls under a concept. If the point of analysis was that clarification of concepts helps us to understand reality better, then our understanding can only be as good as the concepts under analysis. Conceptual engineers question our concepts, ask whether they are suitable for thinking about our social, political, moral, and even everyday realities, in addition to deep philosophical questions. Are extant concepts of race, gender, crime (or even person, knowledge, or law) susceptible of improvement in such a way as to bring into focus phenomena (e.g. gender) that are more salient to a better understanding of various aspects of reality (e.g. oppression)?

That last sentence was really hard to write. What does it even mean? What is conceptual engineering? *What* is it that is being engineered? And what is *engineering*? Is the idea that we just change the dictionary definition of a word in use? How do we do that, and how would it change anyone's thinking? And, in most cases, wouldn't that just change the subject matter? Is that what we want—not just to change our thinking about aspects of the world that we've always talked about, but to change *what* we're talking about? Why is that a worthwhile endeavor? Does changing meaning entail change of concept? Are we revising concepts, clarifying them, or eliminating them in favor of new ones?

More broadly, is the goal to change which aspects of reality we think about because putting those aspects in focus gives us a better understanding of reality in general, or is it to fashion better concepts of the same aspects of reality so that we can grasp those aspects more fully and clearly?

And how do we do any of that?

One gets the sense that some of the confusions that afflicted conceptual analysis are playing out again in conceptual engineering, with not a lot of attention to the fact that they are sources of problems. What is the relation between a concept and a subject matter? What is the relation between the meaning of a linguistic expression and the concept it expresses? Or between the extension of a linguistic expression and the subject matter of a concept? Until some of this is sorted out, conceptual engineering sometimes looks like this:

- Philosopher proposes to engineer concept C to help us understand some important aspect of reality better. So, they propose that C should mean xyz rather than abc.
- What happened? It appears that the word for C (let's say 'C') has simply changed meaning, and with it what it refers to. The result seems to be that concept change just is meaning and reference change. But changing the subject, often a trivial maneuver, is a very different thing from thinking better about a subject.

Is there room for an understanding of conceptual engineering itself that distinguishes the following possibilities?

- Same subject matter (same things in the world under discussion), same concept, different linguistic meaning that allows us to grasp our own concepts better.
- Same subject matter, distinct concept, engineered to facilitate a better understanding of the subject matter, with or without the same meaning.
- Different subject matter, because we want concepts that in fact do categorize the world in a more illuminating way.

We will read some of the seminar papers in conceptual engineering and some of the most recent, influential work in the area. We will focus intensely on what exactly is being proposed and on how thinkers conceive, if at all, of the relations between subject matters, concepts, and meanings.

Readings furnished as .pdf's. Grade based on two presentations, perhaps a short reflection paper, a brief abstract of a term paper, and a final paper.