

Conceptual Engineering as Concept Preservation

Matthew Lindauer
Brooklyn College, City University of New York

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Abstract: In the burgeoning philosophical literature on conceptual engineering improving our concepts is typically portrayed as the hallmark activity of the field. However, Cappelen (2018) has challenged the idea that we can know how and why conceptual changes occur well enough to actively intervene in revising our concepts; the mechanisms of conceptual change are typically inscrutable to us. If the “inscrutability challenge” is correct, the practical aspect of conceptual engineering may seem to be undermined, but I argue that endorsing such pessimism would be a mistake. Even if the inscrutability challenge is correct, conceptual engineers often have good reasons to try to preserve existing concepts. I examine several cases where concept preservation is important and draw lessons about this activity for conceptual engineers.

Conceptual engineering involves assessing concepts or representational devices, proposals to improve them, and efforts to implement these changes (Cappelen 2018). The practical effects of these concepts, particularly sub-optimal ones, are relevant considerations in each of these stages of the enterprise. But a problem for the second and third stages is the enormous empirical task involved in formulating plans for improving or “ameliorating”¹ concepts and attempting to implement these plans. Cappelen (2018) argues that the mechanisms by which changes occur in linguistic and conceptual practice are typically *inscrutable* (*ibid.*, 73) – we cannot figure out how and why they occur well enough to have confidence that we can actively intervene in changing

¹ The use of the term “amelioration” in the conceptual engineering literature is due to Haslanger (2012).

our concepts.² I will follow Cappelen in calling this claim “Inscrutability.” Inscrutability is a surprising claim to hold if we want to place emphasis on conceptual engineering as an interesting and distinctive philosophical method. In other work, I have argued against Inscrutability, marshalling evidence that we can assess the empirical effects of our concepts and efforts to change them along a number of dimensions (Lindauer forthcoming, see also Nado forthcoming). But suppose Inscrutability is true. Does it follow that the practical aspect of conceptual engineering, arguably its distinctive aspect, is closed to us?

I will argue that it does not, because in a range of cases, we have good empirical evidence that *preserving* our existing concepts, at least for some purposes, is preferable to revising them. Concept preservation is an active enterprise, one that draws our attention to kinds of practical considerations that sometimes lead us to attempt to improve our concepts, and often requires us to take action. I offer three cases in what follows and draw lessons from them for the role of concept preservation in conceptual engineering.

1. Preliminaries: Inscrutability and Lack of Control

Before examining the cases, it will be useful to be a bit more specific about the claims under consideration. Cappelen distinguishes between Inscrutability, an epistemic claim, and Lack of Control, a metaphysical claim, which he argues follow from a commitment to metasemantic externalism.³ For metasemantic externalists, the meanings of our words can be influenced by a

² As I elaborate below, inscrutability and lack of control over conceptual change, as Cappelen notes (pp. 72-74), are distinct, but lack of control follows from inscrutability, and Cappelen puts a great deal of emphasis on inscrutability when defending lack of control (p. 74).

³ More precisely, he argues that they follow from a set of externalist assumptions (pp. 72-73).

whole range of factors external to or “outside the heads” (Burge 1979) of speakers: such as past baptismal acts (Kripke 1980) and actions intended to determine meanings, information sources from the past, statements of other people and especially experts, and how they are used over time. I will not question any of these claims, or how they are supposed to imply Inscrutability and Lack of Control. It is clear enough how metasemantic externalism could be thought to imply Inscrutability. Rather than concepts, Cappelen focuses on the meanings of terms as subject to change in conceptual engineering.⁴ To effectively change the meaning of a term, we would need to understand the mechanisms of reference change – how events in the past such as introductory events, the statements of experts, communicative chains, and perhaps various forms of activism and public policy can fit together in a causal process that changes a term’s meaning.⁵ For Cappelen, no cohesive understanding of such a causal process is available to us. But if this understanding is not available—meaning change is inscrutable—then we can’t deliberately aim to bring about such changes with any confidence. Of course, even if we did understand the full process by which we could change the meaning of a term, we might still lack the means of implementing it – the activists may disagree with us, or we may not be able to pass the relevant policies, or whatever. Lack of Control, a metaphysical point about what we are capable of doing, follows from Inscrutability, an epistemic point about what we are capable of knowing or understanding, but not the reverse.

In this paper I focus on the kind of Lack of Control that follows from the Inscrutability that Cappelen argues we are subject to in relation to the mechanisms of conceptual engineering;

⁴ He continues to use the term ‘conceptual engineering’ largely to maintain continuity with the literature and the self-descriptions of other theorists (see, e.g., pp. 3-4).

⁵ Cappelen also holds that the current intensions of terms are inscrutable for us (pp. 73-74), but this claim, as I point out below, doesn’t bear on my argument.

the mechanisms by which concepts or the meanings of terms change. Here is not the place to settle a debate regarding concepts, and I will often refer to concepts rather than terms and their meanings for ease of exposition.⁶ By presenting and discussing a set of realistic (if not perfectly real) examples, my hope is to persuade my audience that concept preservation is not subject to the same worries that concept improvement is. That is, the Inscrutability challenge does not apply, or not in as significant a way, to preservation projects, and Lack of Control is similarly mitigated as a concern. I will argue that this suggests that the almost singular emphasis on concept improvement in discussions of conceptual engineering may be misleading, and that conceptual engineers will often have an important role to play in concept preservation instead.

2. Case 1: The Bad President, 'Citizen,' and Concept Preservation

For the first case, I'll ask you to imagine that a democratic country has elected a bigoted authoritarian president. Suppose that prior to the groundswell of support for this president from his supporters, the concept or representational device 'citizen' had progressed substantially. In the more distant past, the country embraced an ethnonationalist, hierarchical concept of citizenship according to which the "real citizens" were understood to be white, whereas non-white people counted at best as second-class citizens. But due to the hard work of social movements, legal decisions, and many other events, this ethnonationalist concept was replaced by⁷ a more egalitarian citizen concept. Predictably, this progress met with ongoing resistance,

⁶ Other preferred cognitive or linguistic items may also be substituted in without changing anything important for the points that I make here.

⁷ We may instead view this as reforming the prior concept. Nothing important turns on this choice either.

and the new president's support is partly explained by the resistance to this change. He promises people who prefer the old concept to bring their country back to the "good old days," getting rid of the egalitarian concept in favor of the older ethnonationalist one.

Now a set of conceptual engineers thinking about citizenship in that country get together and ask themselves, what should we do about this proposed change to the concept? It is not an amelioration or improvement by their lights – quite the opposite. Allowing the society to go back to the old concept would undo the progress made. In such a case, the conceptual engineers, being practically-minded philosophers of citizenship, should not only abstain from supporting the president's desired change but actively resist it. They should, in other words, prevent *moral backslide*⁸ by doing what they can to preserve the concept that is currently in place. Notably, this could involve preventing moving back to a previously held concept, as in this case, or preventing a brand new concept from being introduced whose effects would be worse than retaining the present one.

One lesson we can take from this case has already been stated – conceptual engineering must not only involve re-engineering but also, in some cases, preserving the concepts that we have upon assessing the practical context that we are in. Indeed, insofar as we accept the metaphorical language of "engineering" concepts at all, the case suggests that we have good reason to include preserving concepts as a part of conceptual engineering, just as preserving buildings and bridges is a part of architectural engineering.⁹ Even in other cases where we are

⁸ The present case involves moral backsliding, but we might also refer to a broader phenomenon of normative backsliding, where the practical effects of new or reintroduced concepts would be normatively worse than preserving the current concept. The sense of worseness may then be broadened to include negative epistemic or aesthetic as well as moral effects.

⁹ I am grateful to Mark Pinder for suggesting that I use the analogy to architectural engineering to draw out my points in this paper, an analogy that I return to in Section 5. Hume (1751/1998) notably likens laws to houses, whose broad functions are similar across culture and contexts but

directly focused on the improvement of concepts, preservation must also be part of the story, just as improvements to physical structures must take their stability or preservability into account.

An improvement that cannot be preserved over time is hardly an improvement at all.

Another important lesson we can take from the first case is that, in instances where our primary focus is on concept preservation, we don't face the Inscrutability challenge that has led many to worry about conceptual engineering as a project.¹⁰ While attempts to introduce a new concept may fail and, even if we succeed, the consequences of doing so are uncertain, the existing concept is already in place, and we know with a high degree of credence what the practical effects of our existing concepts have been. Indeed, especially if Inscrutability is true, it may be that *most* of the real-world work that conceptual engineers should be doing involves attempting to protect our hard-won concepts.¹¹ But how we should we do so in light of the tension between our short and long term goals is not always obvious, and itself requires assessment.

3. Case 2: Marriage Equality and Short versus Long-Term Goals

To examine this tension, let's consider the following case:

whose non-functional and local functional features may differ. For a helpful discussion, see Queloz (2019), p. 22.

¹⁰ See for instance Schroeter and Schroeter (forthcoming).

¹¹ Notably, Bernard Williams (2002) argues that we should preserve the concept of truth on the basis of a genealogical explanation of the value of truth and truthfulness. I'm grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing this connection. For an illuminating essay on Williams' views on the value of truth, see Queloz (2018).

A society is debating whether to adopt a new law that legalizes same-sex marriage.¹² Suppose that all of the conceptual engineers support the spirit of the law, which is the goal of bringing about equality for gay and straight couples, but some of them disagree about whether same-sex marriage is the best way to realize this goal. Those who disagree with the proposed law emphasize that the traditional conception of marriage is heteronormative, or that extending it in this way would express the judgment that people have to be married to have their relationship treated with equal respect by the state, or any of a number of other objections that they and many activists believe to be correct. They would prefer to broaden the rights and privileges accorded to people in civil unions and eventually abolish state-sanctioned marriage. Those who agree with the law understand these objections, but disagree that the law should be resisted on these grounds. Some of them emphasize the importance of a “foot in the door” effect of marriage equality in other countries, while others disagree that the idea of marriage cannot be reformed to avoid its historical heteronormative connotations, in part by extending equal marital status to more types of relationships.

One might think that there is a danger of conservatism in emphasizing that certain concepts should be retained. Suppose that the society has basically settled on the idea that same-sex marriage should be legalized, and the question is whether these conceptual engineers should push hard to make sure that the concept of same-sex marriage is or is not enshrined in the law. Proponents of the law *can* agree with the marriage abolitionists that, in some sense, it would be a desirable long-term goal to get rid of the concept of marriage. But for any number of reasons, including ones similar to those mentioned above, they may think this unlikely to happen, or that

¹² The case as depicted is more of a simplification of its real-world counterpart than the previous one. This is necessary for clarity of presentation, and will not affect the points that I wish to raise.

acting as if it will by opposing the law will do more harm than good for gay citizens. So a further principle familiar in discussions of non-ideal theory is that in considering whether to retain a concept or push for something more revisionary, if our prospects of success in the second case are very weak, we may reasonably aim not to make the ideal the enemy of justice, or as it is more often said, “the best the enemy of the good.” Of course, we may not accept that the more revisionary approach really would be ideal or best, but even granting our interlocutors that it might be, preservation may be the approach that, for the time being, appears to be the most advisable.

This case also brings out the point that a given engineering-via-preservation attempt may carry with it the requirement to re-evaluate in an ongoing fashion and try to build into our engineering approach the insights of those who disagree with the form that it takes. For instance, if we are the engineers proposing to enshrine the acceptance of gay marriage in the law, we should probably think through how to avoid the problems that our colleagues who support the spirit but not the letter of the proposal have pointed out. This can mean remaining in contact with these persons to see if their concerns are persuasive and being addressed, and being willing to evaluate over time whether the engineering project has succeeded in realizing its aims, or all of the aims that it ought to. There may be lessons for the engineering project itself in the concerns of those who oppose it.

4. Case 3: Conceptions of Feminism, Balancing Considerations

Consider a final case:¹³

There is disagreement among feminists over how to understand the constitutive commitments that make a social movement count as feminist. Some conceptual engineers in this debate hold that any conception of feminism that tolerates constraints on women's dress in the form of modesty norms, or religious beliefs that emphasize distinctive roles that men and women should play (gender-complementarianism), is not real feminism. Other conceptual engineers emphasize that, while plausible in some sense, such conceptions often fail to recognize similar though less explicit constraints on women that liberal feminism tolerates, such as beauty norms and norms that require women to take on the lion's share of dependency work, and also exclude movements for women's empowerment that embrace religious and cultural traditions and re-interpret modesty norms and gender-complementarian doctrines.

Things would be simpler in such a case if there were only benefits attached to one of these options and no costs to it. But suppose that there are some costs attached to both approaches. For proponents of the first, the alternative approach gives up too much in the way of criticism and accords less well with the spirit of what they think feminism should be, so at least their dissatisfaction is a cost. The cost of their approach, however, is that many of the women who are disadvantaged already would be further disadvantaged by being denied the ability to call themselves feminists and draw support as such from feminist movements around the world (Khader 2018).

¹³ This case is based on discussions in Khader (2018). As with the previous example, I have made the contrasts simplistic in comparison to their real world counterparts for ease of exposition.

In this case, we aren't proposing two new concepts, but rather choosing which of two concepts that are already out there in the world, in social reality and discourse around women's issues, to promote and preserve. I cannot resolve the disagreement regarding concepts of feminism here, but only use the case to illustrate that concept preservation gives rise to moral decision points. Concept preservation is not merely about preserving a single concept in many cases, but deciding which among a set of concepts to preserve, and making these decisions often requires us to weigh competing moral considerations. Making judgments regarding whose interests are most significant and urgent among those affected by our concept preservation options is often unavoidable. In certain cases we may be morally required to consult the affected parties through some sort of democratic procedure, given the effects that our choices will have on their interests (Goodin 2007). The details of how to weigh moral considerations will depend on the particular case, but the need to strike the relevant balances in concept preservation is worth noting.¹⁴

A further lesson that each of these cases brings out that I have not yet mentioned is that not all conceptual engineering involves ameliorating, improving, or even preserving our concepts, the activity that I have emphasized here. Perhaps all conceptual engineering projects *attempt* to do these things in the eyes of their implementers. But they may, of course, be

¹⁴ A reviewer helpfully notes that the decision whether to attempt to preserve a concept is itself a moral decision point. This is, of course, also true of the decision whether to attempt to improve a concept. I have suggested that one type of case in which it is often very clear that we should try to preserve concepts is when we are confronted with the possibility of moral backsliding (Case 1). The broader question of how to decide whether to engage in concept preservation is a difficult and important one, going beyond the bounds of the present paper. As in the cases discussed, my current view is that we will often have to weigh competing interests, as well as moral principles and other requirements. Here we border on ethics more generally, but it is possible that further moral theorizing about concept preservation will yield surprising and domain-specific conclusions.

mistaken about the value of their interventions. Reactionary movements, in general, are conceptual engineering projects,¹⁵ as the first case shows, and while they are perhaps thought to aim at improving concepts by their adherents, they regularly adopt immoral conceptual ends and immoral means to achieving them. As I have suggested, if Inscrutability is right, it may be that the best many conceptual engineers can hope to do is resist such bad projects with good concept preserving projects, rather than revising existing concepts or attempting to introduce new ones into social reality.

5. Concept Preservation, Inscrutability, and Lack of Control

As I have suggested above, concept preservation avoids the Inscrutability challenge, which depends on our lack of knowledge about the causal mechanisms of conceptual engineering in the sense of how concepts or the meanings of terms change over time. But if concept preservation is to be recognized as an important part of conceptual engineering, why isn't there a similar worry regarding our lack of knowledge of the causal mechanisms of how concepts and meanings stay the same? My argument is not that there is no causal knowledge, or better, information regarding causal mechanisms that conceptual engineers will require in attempting to preserve concepts. If this wasn't the case, concept preservation arguably would not be part of conceptual engineering, and would be of little practical interest, the opposite of what I've suggested. Conceptual engineers take it as a given that concepts or terms are part of a causal nexus, and these concepts can be and are regularly affected by other entities in that nexus, including other entities that may attempt to change them (for instance, the bad president). But it is implausible

¹⁵ See Srinivasan (2019) for a similar point regarding worldmaking projects.

that we are lacking information regarding how to preserve concepts to the same extent that we are regarding how to substantially revise concepts or produce new ones.

Consider an analogy to a traditional engineering project, a building. A whole host of causal knowledge and information is required to create an office building, or a modern house, or even a cabin in the woods. Once the relevant building is up and functioning, however, it does not just stay in place untouched. It is subject to forces that lead to deterioration over time – rain and wind pound at its exterior, and the people who use it apply pressure to its floors and walls, drop heavy objects, spill liquids, and so on. While we may not have knowledge of how to build the home or office that we are in, we probably have a good deal of knowledge of how to preserve it in many cases. We know to replace the windows if they crack, to clean up spills quickly, and try to avoid dropping objects that might damage the floors in general.

Putting new concepts into place clearly requires far more knowledge than the knowledge involved in building a house. But like this simple architectural engineering project, concepts deteriorate over time. Terms are subject to “semantic drift,” the process by which their meaning gradually changes over time, sometimes to the point that current meaning diverges greatly from original meaning. As noted above, there may also be agents or social forces that seek to erode or eliminate terms and concepts. But whereas how to put these concepts into place may be inscrutable to us, how to keep our existing concepts in place is far more manageable as a task.

Of course, and particularly in cases where we are trying to prevent moral backslide, we may lack full control over whether our concepts stay the same, even if we have a good handle on what would be required to preserve them. So while Inscrutability might not hold, or might not hold to the same extent, in the case of concept preservation, Lack of Control could be thought to hold equally for concept preservation and concept improvement. I think this is also a mistake.

Even if we can't fully control whether or not our concepts will change—again, the bad president in the first case would not be as much of a cause for concern if we had complete control over whether our concepts remain the same—there are three main factors on the side of concept preservation that suggest that we have a greater degree of control than when we are attempting to significantly revise existing concepts or introduce new ones. First, concepts that are already securely part of our social and individual cognition have achieved uptake (Pinder 2017) – they have been accepted to some extent, and thus there is some evidence that they can be accepted on an ongoing basis. This suggests that we may have luck in keeping them around, since they have already achieved a place in our shared conceptual repertoire. Not so for revised or new concepts that have yet to be offered to the public.

Second, and relatedly, the fact that a concept has achieved uptake will often give rise to an anchoring effect, whereby it is harder to change a concept that is seen as a relatively fixed part of our communication and thought. There is, in other words, a tendency toward conceptual inertia that will often be helpful in entrenching concepts, and that we can rely on in our attempts to preserve them.

Lastly, for existing concepts, we often have the ability to vouch for them by pointing to past successes and benefits that they brought about, as shown in the citizen and marriage cases above. This is not, again, to say that we must always retain concepts because they have served us in the past. Our circumstances may have changed, or the concept may have been a useful stepping stone on the way to greater progress through better concepts that we ought to introduce later. But in the case of existing concepts, we can at least point to these successes and benefits, and this will often be useful in defending and thereby helping to preserve them. In the case of

revised or new concepts, we may instead be staring into the unknown, and so people may be less willing to try them than to stick with what has a proven track record.

For these reasons, lack of control is at least much less of a worry for the concept preserving conceptual engineer than it is for the concept improving one. Just as there are elements of inscrutability, there are elements of lack of control in the project of concept preservation. But they give rise to nothing like the same worries that Cappelen points out for ameliorative or improving projects in conceptual engineering.

6. Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have suggested that, if we take the Inscrutability challenge seriously, we should replace much of our thinking about concept improvement with a focus on concept preservation instead. Why have conceptual engineers been so focused on amelioration and improvement then? As Cappelen notes, it may be nice to think that we as philosophers and academics can have a big effect on the world through our work (Cappelen 2018, p. 75). This may be especially true where contentious social issues are concerned. The literature on conceptual engineering also bears a heavy debt to Carnap's work on explication (Carnap 1950, 1955), and it may be partly due to his influence that the idea of improvement is so entrenched in many discussions of this research program. But it may be that, to take another term from Carnap, our existing concepts are more "fruitful"¹⁶ than those that some conceptual engineers are offering or, worse, are trying to thrust upon us. If Inscrutability is true, concept preservation will also tend to be a more

¹⁶ Carnap (1950, 1955). See Lindauer (forthcoming) for an account of fruitfulness that focuses on moral and political concepts.

fruitful enterprise than concept improvement. And as I have suggested, in the course of seeking to defend a concept against challenges or objections and develop it further, there may be significant room for more modest revisions that also avoid taking on too large a practical burden.¹⁷

¹⁷ For helpful discussion of the ideas in this paper, I would like to thank Herman Cappelen and Olav Gjelsvik. For written comments, I am grateful to Serene Khader, Mark Pinder, and an anonymous reviewer for the journal.

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