

SYMPOSIUM  
ON HERMAN CAPPELEN'S *FIXING LANGUAGE*

## The Role of Concepts in *Fixing Language*

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### Abstract

This is a contribution to the symposium on Herman Cappelen's book *Fixing Language*. Cappelen proposes a metasemantic framework—the “Austerity Framework”—within which to understand the general phenomenon of conceptual engineering. The proposed framework is austere in the sense that it makes no reference to concepts. Conceptual engineering is then given a “worldly” construal according to which conceptual engineering is a process that operates on the world. I argue, contra Cappelen, that an adequate theory of conceptual engineering must make reference to concepts. This is because concepts are required to account for topic continuity, a phenomenon which lies at the heart of projects in conceptual engineering. I argue that Cappelen's own account of topic continuity is inadequate as a result of the austerity of his metasemantic framework, and that his worldly construal of conceptual engineering is untenable.

**Keywords:** Cappelen; conceptual engineering; metasemantics; externalism; concepts; thought; language

### 1. Introduction

*Fixing Language* provides a metasemantic framework within which to understand the general phenomenon of conceptual engineering. The role of a metasemantic framework in this context is to specify what kinds of semantic or representational elements, together with their determination conditions, are required to explain the phenomenon of conceptual engineering. Cappelen's metasemantic framework is externalist and appeals to the intensions and extensions of linguistic expressions. He calls his proposed metasemantic framework the “Austerity Framework.” It is austere in the sense that it makes no appeal to concepts. Within this austere metasemantic framework, conceptual engineering is given a “worldly” construal, according to which conceptual engineering is understood not as a process that operates on representational devices such as lexical items or concepts, but as a process that operates “on the world” (46).<sup>1</sup> He says:

On this view, an instance of successful conceptual engineering, e.g., of “person,” has the result that what a person is has changed. I think this “worldly” description is the correct way to describe all instances of conceptual engineering, not just in the social domain... . We are reclassifying, but on the view I develop, that reclassification can be described without going metalinguistic (i.e., without quoting words or referring to concepts). (46)

There is much to admire in Cappelen's book. It is systematic, thorough, and beautifully clear, dealing at an abstract level with a topic of increasing interest. It also breaks from the mainstream in

<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all page references are to Cappelen's *Fixing Language* (2018).

interesting and radical ways. As it happens, there are significant elements of the book with which I agree. I agree that a theory of conceptual engineering will have its foundations in a metasemantic framework, and that externalism provides an adequate such framework. I agree that projects in conceptual engineering will not be entirely under the control of the theorists, and that both theories of conceptual engineering and the metasemantic frameworks that underpin them will themselves be subject to contestation. I agree that a theory of conceptual engineering requires an account of topic continuity, and that conceptual engineering is not only about concepts and words, but also about the world. On some level, then, I agree with each of the six central themes of Cappelen's book as set out at the end of chapter 1. I also agree with Cappelen that the alternative metasemantic frameworks on the market are inadequate, as are the specific construals of conceptual engineering that flow from them. Conceptual engineering is not primarily about language (*cf.* Chalmers 2011; Plunkett and Sundell 2013; Ludlow 2014), and the specific ways in which concepts have been invoked by conceptual engineers are implausible: concepts should not be understood as involving constitutive principles (*cf.* Scharp 2013; Eklund 2017) or as having functions or roles (*cf.* Haslanger 1999, 2000; Brigandt 2010; Thomasson forthcoming). But we should resist the temptation to conclude that an adequate explanation of conceptual engineering need make no reference to concepts at all. On the contrary, the phenomenon of conceptual engineering cannot be adequately explained without making reference to concepts. (See Sawyer 2018 and Sawyer 2020, neither of which was available at the time *Fixing Language* was written.)

The fundamental disagreement between us, then, concerns the question of whether concepts are required in order to explain the phenomenon of conceptual engineering. In this paper, I argue, contra Cappelen, that an adequate theory of conceptual engineering must invoke concepts because concepts are required to account for topic continuity, a phenomenon which lies at the heart of projects in conceptual engineering. Further, I argue that Cappelen's own account of topic continuity is inadequate as a result of the austerity of his metasemantic framework. Finally, I argue that the worldly construal of conceptual engineering underpinned by Cappelen's austerity framework is untenable. Moreover, once we disentangle two strands of externalism that Cappelen runs together—one involving a subject's relation to her linguistic community, the other involving a subject's relation to objective properties in her nonlinguistic world—a more palatable account of conceptual engineering, one that is not available from within Cappelen's austere metasemantic framework, comes into view.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In section 2, I outline the importance of topic continuity for projects in conceptual engineering. I argue against Cappelen's concept-free account of topic continuity and contrast it with my own concept-invoking account. In section 3, I argue against Cappelen's worldly construal of conceptual engineering. I go on to suggest an alternative account that allows us to accept Cappelen's claim that conceptual engineering is not a process that operates on representational devices such as lexical items or concepts while rejecting his claim that conceptual engineering operates on the world. I conclude briefly in section 4.

## 2. Topic continuity

Projects in conceptual engineering (ameliorative projects) typically advocate a revisionary analysis of a key term. Thus Clark and Chalmers (1998) advocate a revisionary analysis of the term "belief"; Haslanger (1999) advocates a revisionary analysis of the term "knowledge"; Haslanger (2000) advocates revisionary analyses of the gender terms "man" and "woman" and of race terms such as "Latino" and "white"; Eklund (2002) and Scharp (2013) advocate a revisionary analysis of the term "truth"; Eklund (2017) advocates a revisionary analysis of normative terms; and public debates over the terms "marriage," "rape," and "person," for example, are naturally understood as debates between those who want to retain the historical use of the relevant term, along with its traditional analysis, and those who think the use of the term ought to change in accordance with a proposed

revisionary analysis. Such revisionary analyses aim to provide a term with a new intension (a new meaning) as well as a new corresponding extension. Cappelen puts the point as follows:

Amelioration, in my framework, always involves *the extension and intension of a predicate changing over time*. ... What I have in mind are changes in extensions that are driven by changes in intensions. So relative to the same circumstance of evaluation (e.g., world/time pair) extensions can change. One way to think of this is: the conditions that need to be satisfied in order to fall into the extension of “person” (or “woman” or “marriage” or “belief”) have been changed by conceptual engineering, and as a result of that the intension and extension of this term have changed... . Things that were not in the extension pre-amelioration go in, and some of what was in goes out... . (62; original emphasis)

Projects in conceptual engineering, then, aim to change the intension and extension of a key term; they aim for semantic change.<sup>2</sup> But projects in conceptual engineering are not defined merely by the fact that, if successful, they would result in semantic change, since semantic change need not come about as the result of conceptual engineering and hence need not count as ameliorative. Think for example of the semantic change over time of terms such as “meat,” “wicked,” “ace,” and “awful,” which occur as a result of “mere semantic drift” rather than as a result of conceptual engineering. In cases of mere semantic drift, the intension and extension of a term changes, but so does the subject matter or topic that the term allows us to talk about. This is not typically so in cases of conceptual engineering. Those engaged in conceptual engineering typically propose a revisionary analysis as a better way of talking about the same topic. What marks out a semantic change as ameliorative, then, is topic continuity. In each of the examples of conceptual engineering mentioned above, we want to say that both those who advocate in favor of the proposed revisionary analysis and those who resist the proposed revisionary analysis are, despite their differences, nonetheless talking about a shared topic: belief, knowledge, men, women, Latinos, whites, truth, marriage, rape, and persons. Similarly, we want to say that if the semantic change takes effect, the relevant term is used to talk about the very same topic both preamelioration and postamelioration. In none of these cases has the topic, or subject matter, changed.<sup>3</sup>

This gives rise to what Cappelen calls “Strawson’s Challenge”: How can a change in the intension and extension of a term be understood as preserving a topic rather than simply changing it? (*Cf.* Strawson 1963 in response to the account of explication in Carnap 1950.) To see the problem, note that if the topic marked out by a term were identified with the extension of that term, then a topic would necessarily change in line with a change in extension. This would, effectively, render conceptual engineering as described above a conceptual impossibility. A metasemantic framework within which to understand the general phenomenon of conceptual engineering must, then, have the resources to separate the extension of a term from the topic or subject matter that it concerns. Only then will it be able to accommodate the claim of the conceptual engineer that her revisionary analysis provides a better way of talking about the same topic.

Noting that expressions such as “content,” “intension,” and “extension” are theoretical terms, in contrast to expressions such as “what she said,” “what she was talking about,” and “talking about the same topic,” which Cappelen takes to be pretheoretic notions (108), he argues that “topics are more coarse-grained than extensions and intensions, and so expressions that differ with respect to

<sup>2</sup>There are those who disagree with this characterization, but I will not enter that debate here. There is no commitment here to the claim that conceptual engineering aims *only* for semantic change. I am also open to the suggestion that projects which aim for pragmatic change might be projects in conceptual engineering, although I leave such cases to one side here.

<sup>3</sup>There will no doubt be disagreement over which semantic changes count as ameliorative and which count as mere semantic drift. Note, however, that such disagreement maps on to disagreement about which semantic changes are topic preserving and which are not. My own view is that topic preservation through semantic change requires the possibility of communal error, since topic preservation through semantic change requires the objectivity of the topic in question. I do not have the space to elaborate this point here.

extensions and intensions can be about the same topic” (101).<sup>4</sup> He takes this point to be captured in his principle: “*Coarseness*: Sameness of topic doesn’t track sameness of extension” (109). The truth of the principle would allow for continuity of topic through a change in the intension and extension of a term, which would in turn allow a revisionary analysis to provide, at least in principle, a better way of talking about the very same topic. Note that what the principle *says* is that sameness of topic doesn’t track sameness of extension. But by labeling the principle “*Coarseness*,” Cappelen makes reference to the further claim that this is because topics are more coarse-grained than extensions. Clearly the claims are distinct. It is possible to agree with the content of the principle—that sameness of topic doesn’t track sameness of extension—and to agree that in certain cases topics are more coarse-grained than extensions, but to reject the claim that the latter provides a proper explanation of the former. I return to this point below.

Cappelen aims to establish the point that topics are more coarse-grained than extensions, and hence that sameness of topic does not track sameness of extension, by appeal to two sets of linguistic data: the first concerns the phenomenon of context-sensitivity (*cf.* Cappelen and Lepore 1997; Cappelen and Hawthorne 2009; Cappelen and Dever 2016); the second concerns the phenomenon of semantic plasticity (*cf.* Dorr and Hawthorne 2014). Since I find Dorr and Hawthorne’s discussion of semantic plasticity problematic in a number of respects, and since Cappelen draws on it merely to reinforce a point he takes already to be established by the linguistic data on context-sensitivity, I leave it to one side here and focus exclusively on the case of context-sensitive terms.<sup>5</sup> According to Cappelen, then, gradable adjectives such as “cold,” “happy,” “expensive,” “smart,” and “interesting” are context-sensitive in the sense that their extensions are determined by fine-grained, contextually variant factors such as comparison classes or cut-off points on a scale. As such, there are infinitely many potential extensions for such adjectives because there are infinitely many possible comparison classes and infinitely many possible cut-off points on different scales. Nonetheless, we can often describe people who utter, for example, the sentence “*T* is an interesting theory” in different contexts as having said the same thing—namely, that *T* is an interesting theory. Cappelen says “it is a fact about our reporting practice that we don’t, in such cases, require the comparison class of interesting theories or the cut-off point on a scale of interestingness to be identical” (109). Since sameness of topic goes hand in hand with samesaying, and people can say the same thing despite differences in the intensions and extensions of their terms, people can also talk about the same topic despite differences in the intensions and extensions of their terms; and given the plethora of context-sensitive expressions in our language, this is, according to Cappelen, a general phenomenon.

For present purposes, I am willing to grant the data on context-sensitive terms and, hence, to grant that Cappelen’s examples establish that topic continuity is consistent with variations in intensions and extensions. As he says, “*hardly anyone has advocated the view that identity of semantic content is required for samesaying*” (110; original emphasis). This means that the very idea of conceptual engineering should not be rejected on the grounds that topic continuity is inconsistent with a change in the intension and extension of a term; it is not. But establishing this point falls short of explaining how topics and extensions can diverge in a way that would make sense of the phenomenon of conceptual engineering. This is for two related reasons. First, to show that topic continuity is consistent with variations in intensions and extensions is not yet to explain *how* this is possible. To identify the phenomenon is not yet to explain it. Cappelen’s metasemantic framework provides an account of the relation between a term and an extension: there are conditions that need to be satisfied in order to fall into the extension of a term, and it is these conditions that change in the process of conceptual engineering, thereby resulting in a change in the intension and extension of

<sup>4</sup>Cappelen explores two strategies for responding to Strawson’s challenge. The first appeals to the coarseness of topics relative to intensions and extensions (*cf.* chapter 10); the second appeals to lexical effects (*cf.* chapter 11). Since he endorses the first response over the second, I do not discuss the second here.

<sup>5</sup>For one thing, I am uneasy about Dorr and Hawthorne’s assumption that the semantic facts supervene on the microphysical facts.

the relevant term. But Cappelen's metasemantic framework does not provide an account of the relation between a term and a topic. What is needed is an account of how we connect representationally to a topic *per se*, and that account needs to explain why the representational connection between a term and a topic is not disrupted by intensional and extensional variation of the kind that occurs in conceptual engineering. I return to this point below.

Focusing on cases of context-sensitivity might lead one to believe that topics can be identified with contextually determined similarity classes of extensions. The relation between a term and a topic could then be constructed on this basis. For example, a term *t* could be thought of as related to, or as representing topic *T* in context *C* if and only if *t* has an extension that is a member of the similarity class of extensions that constitute *T* in *C*. We could even allow some vagueness. This understanding of topics would count as metaphysically lightweight, and, hence, *prima facie* acceptable within Cappelen's austere framework because it wouldn't introduce any new representational devices or new kinds of entities. But even if an account along these lines could be made to work in the case of context-sensitive terms, it is fundamentally flawed as an account of topic continuity in the ameliorative case. This is because there is a significant difference between the kind of variation that is tolerated within the bounds of topic continuity in cases of context-sensitivity and the kind of variation that is tolerated within the bounds of topic continuity in cases of amelioration. This is the second reason that Cappelen's discussion of context-sensitive terms falls short of explaining how topics and extensions can diverge in a way that would make sense of the phenomenon of conceptual engineering. We can see this by looking at each kind of case in turn.

In cases of context-sensitivity, the pretheoretic intuition of samesaying, and hence of topic continuity, is mapped theoretically by a significant overlap between the different extensions of the term as used by each of the samesayers. It may be, as Cappelen says, a fact about our reporting practice that samesaying does not require the comparison class or the cut-off point to be identical, but it does require a significant amount of overlap. What is tolerated within the bounds of topic continuity in cases of context-sensitivity, then, is not variation across the board, but merely variation at the periphery. I do not deny, of course, that two uses of a context-sensitive term may have entirely different extensions. For example, the term "tall" can be applied on one occasion in relation to five year olds and on another occasion in relation to professional basketball players. The heights that fall into the extension of the term in the first context may be entirely different from the heights that fall into the extension of the term in the second context. But discussions of tallness in these different contexts would not be understood as discussions of the same topic. Rather, we would differentiate the topics by noting that the first discussion concerned tallness-for-a-five-year-old while the second concerned tallness-for-a-professional-basketball-player. Samesaying and topic continuity involving context-sensitive terms, then, are not constrained by identity of extension, but they are constrained by significant overlap in extension.

In cases of conceptually engineered terms, in contrast, the pretheoretic intuition of samesaying, and hence of topic continuity, is *not* mapped theoretically by a significant overlap between the different extensions of the term as used by each of the samesayers. Indeed, there may be no overlap whatsoever between the extension of a term preamelioration and the extension of that term postamelioration, and yet the intuition of samesaying, and hence of topic continuity, may persist. In cases of amelioration, then, what is tolerated is not merely variation at the periphery but a much more radical kind of variation that runs through to the core. For example, the amelioration of race terms can be understood as an attempt to replace a mistaken, biological understanding of race by an explicitly social understanding of race on the grounds that there are no such things as biological races. In this kind of case, there would be topic continuity in the absence of any overlap in extension because the topic of a term such as "Latino," for example, would be Latinos both preamelioration and postamelioration, even though the conditions that determine the extension of the preameliorative term determine an extension which is empty—empty because there is nothing that satisfies the condition of being a person of biological race. Think also of conceptual engineering projects relating to the term "truth" (*cf.* Tarski [1933] 1983; Eklund 2002; Scharp 2013). Such projects are

typically motivated by the attempt to eliminate internal inconsistency that results in paradox. Since, if all goes well, there is internal inconsistency preamelioration but not postamelioration, the term has an empty extension preamelioration (nothing can satisfy inconsistent conditions) but has a nonempty extension postamelioration. Consequently, there is no overlap in extension, but there is nonetheless, as Cappelen is happy to accept, a single topic that persists throughout the process: truth. Although one might want to treat the cases differently, topic continuity through dramatic change in extension is also commonplace in science. For example, the definition of the term “atom” once included the condition that an atom be indivisible but now includes the condition that an atom be divisible. There is, of necessity, nothing which is both divisible and indivisible and, hence, there is, of necessity, no overlap between the extensions of the term pre- and postchange. Nonetheless, there is a single topic that persists throughout the theoretical change: atoms.<sup>6</sup>

Many examples of successful conceptual engineering will, as it happens, involve an overlap between the extension of a term preamelioration and the extension of that term postamelioration, but the absence of any overlap is no impediment to topic continuity in the ameliorative case. The upshot is that extensional variation in the context-sensitive case, in which topic continuity presupposes significant extensional overlap, does not provide an adequate model for extensional variation in the ameliorative case, where significant extensional overlap cannot be presupposed. Cappelen’s appeal to the linguistic data on context-sensitivity, then, fails to explain how topics and extensions can diverge in a way that would make sense of the phenomenon of conceptual engineering.<sup>7</sup>

I said earlier that a metasemantic framework within which to understand the general phenomenon of conceptual engineering must have the resources to separate the extension of a term from the topic it concerns. Only then, I said, will it be able to accommodate the claim of the conceptual engineer that her revisionary analysis provides a better way of talking about the same topic. Reflection on specific cases makes it clear that an adequate metasemantic framework must have the resources not only to separate the extension of a term from the topic it concerns, but to treat the two as ontologically independent rather than, for example, treating the former as constructed from the latter, or as being coarse-grained relative to the latter. Only then will it be possible for a term to concern the same topic at two times despite there being no overlap between the extensions of the term at those times. This is where Cappelen’s austere metasemantic framework runs into difficulty. In order for topics and extensions to be ontologically independent, there must be two ontologically independent representational relations: one to connect a term to an extension, the other to connect a term to a topic. Only then will it be possible for the topic of a term to remain stable through a radical shift in its extension. But two ontologically independent representation relations requires two representational devices.<sup>8</sup> And this is what Cappelen’s austere metasemantic framework does not have. As such, it cannot provide an adequate explanation of the phenomenon of conceptual engineering.

A metasemantic framework within which to understand the general phenomenon of conceptual engineering, then, requires two kinds of representational device: one to connect a term to an extension, the other to connect a term to a topic. We have been assuming that the intension, or

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<sup>6</sup>My own view is that conceptual engineering is just a form of theoretical change. Standard examples of conceptual engineering and standard scientific examples may strike us as different because the former cases involve a strong intuition of extensional change, whereas the latter cases involve a strong intuition of extensional stability. However, once we distinguish the extension of a term from the topic of a term, we see that examples of both kinds often involve extension-shift and topic continuity. Not every change in prevailing beliefs will bring about a change in the extension of the relevant term, of course.

<sup>7</sup>Lest it be thought that I have stacked the decks against Cappelen’s account by setting aside discussion of semantic plasticity, note that in cases of semantic plasticity topic continuity also presupposes significant extensional overlap.

<sup>8</sup>There are, perhaps, examples of single representational devices that allow for two representational relations: e.g., semantic vs. pragmatic meaning, literal vs. metaphorical meaning, semantic vs. speaker meaning. But such examples presuppose a connection between the meanings in each pair and, hence, don’t provide an adequate model for the ameliorative case, which requires ontological independence. I do not have the space to expand on this thought here.



meaning of a term, performs the former role. What performs the latter role, I suggest, is the concept expressed by a term. There is good reason not to conflate the two, and good reason to recognize both (cf. Burge 1986; Sawyer 2007; Sawyer 2018; Sawyer 2020). I will offer a brief characterization of meanings and concepts here, and I return to the distinction between the two toward the end of the next section when I consider the role of externalism in Cappelen's austere metasemantic framework.

The meaning, or intension, of a term is externally determined in the sense that it is determined by social practices—patterns of actual use and deference across the community—rather than by the dispositions or beliefs of an individual speaker. Since the social practices relating to a given term may change over time, the intension and extension of a term may change over time. This picture fits naturally with Cappelen's account. Note that on this picture, linguistic norms are conventional because they are determined by social practice. It is their conventional nature that not only allows them to change but opens them up to explicit challenge. As Burge says:

A conventional norm is nearly always subject to the most general evaluative question: "Is it true?" If new empirical facts or new insights are imported into the discussion, the background assumptions of normative characterizations may be undermined, and the characterizations themselves may be shown to be mistaken. (Burge 1986, 714)

This is precisely what motivates projects in conceptual engineering. Ameliorative projects challenge the current social practice surrounding the use of a term and, hence, challenge the conventional linguistic norms that govern the use of that term on the grounds that the nature of, for example, belief, knowledge, men, women, Latinos, whites, truth, marriage, rape, or persons has not been correctly characterized. A revisionary analysis is a proposal for how the key term *ought* to be used, and provides, in effect, what the ameliorators take to be the *correct* characterization of the relevant topic. If the ameliorative project is successful, the social practice surrounding the use of the key term changes in accordance with the proposed revisionary analysis, and, hence, the revisionary analysis comes to reflect the new conventional linguistic norms that derive from the new social practice.

Thus, one set of conventional linguistic norms can be replaced by another. A conventional linguistic norm can, of course, be challenged on the grounds that it conflicts with other existing linguistic norms, as well as on the grounds of mere preference for a different social practice, but to challenge a conventional linguistic norm on the grounds that it does not correctly characterize the nature of, for example, belief, knowledge, men, women, Latinos, whites, truth, marriage, rape, or persons is to appeal to a norm that goes beyond social practice and, hence, is not determined by convention. Social practice provides linguistic norms relative to which individual use can be assessed as correct or incorrect. But in order for social practice itself to be assessable as correct or incorrect, there must be norms that are not themselves determined by social practice. If all representational norms were conventional, semantic change would always be mere semantic drift. Topic continuity requires nonconventional representational norms. Burge calls such nonconventional, representational norms "intellectual norms," and their importance is reflected by the title of his paper: "Intellectual Norms and Foundations of Mind" (1986). The sofa/safo example from the paper is often cited in favor of externalism. But the significance of the distinction between conventional linguistic norms and intellectual norms both to the specific example and to externalism more generally are typically overlooked. The protagonist in the example has a complete understanding of the linguistic meaning of the term "sofa," but doubts the communally accepted definition of the term because he thinks the community as a whole is mistaken about the nature of sofas. He is aiming for truth. It is concepts—components of thought—that make his doubt possible. More generally, it is concepts that allow us to doubt, for example, *that beliefs are internal states, that women are females, that marriage precludes rape*, and so on. Such doubts are object-level doubts about topics that are represented conceptually. This is the sense in which, as Burge says, "thought can correct meaning" (1986, 714).

The distinction between linguistic norms and intellectual norms (norms of thought) brings with it a corresponding distinction between meanings and concepts. Concepts are externally determined, but not in the way that meanings are. The concept expressed by a term is determined neither by the dispositions or beliefs of an individual speaker nor by the dispositions, beliefs, or social practices of the community as a whole. Rather, it is determined by fundamental, nonconceptual relations to objective, nonlinguistic properties. Again, as Burge says, “even where social practices are deeply involved in individuating mental states, they are often not the final arbiter. This is because the sort of agreement that fixes communal meaning ... is itself open to challenge” (1986, 707). Concepts provide norms of thought that are not conventional but are instead beholden to the nature of the objective properties they represent.

Cappelen is right to say that we can “talk about *the same topic*, e.g., knowledge, belief, freedom, or marriage, even though the extension and intension of ‘knowledge,’ ‘belief,’ ‘freedom,’ and ‘marriage’ change” (103; original emphasis), and he is right to say that such a change can constitute an improvement in the sense of providing a better way to talk about the same topic. But this is not because topics are more coarse-grained than extensions. Rather, it is because a concept represents a topic in a way that transcends social practice; it provides a representational anchor to a subject matter that is capable of remaining fixed as the social practice ebbs and flows around it. It is this distinction between thought and meaning that accounts for the distinction between topics and extensions and, hence, grounds an adequate explanation of the phenomenon of conceptual engineering.

### 3. The worldly construal of conceptual engineering

At the beginning of chapter 12, Cappelen identifies three possible responses to the question of what is engineered in the process of conceptual engineering:

*Option 1: Something Conceptual:* On this kind of view, conceptual engineering is about concepts (whatever they may be), the constitutive principles for concepts (whatever they may be), or the constitutive principles for concept possession (whatever they may be).

*Option 2: Words and Their Meanings (or Extensions):* On this view, conceptual engineering is about words of a specific language and their meanings.

*Option 3: The World—Object Level:* On this view, conceptual engineering is about the world. It is about, for example, marriage, persons, torture, or freedom. So construed, the result of conceptual engineering can be described as an object-level change: “we’re changing what gender, freedom, salad, marriage, etc. *are*.” (138; original emphasis)

Cappelen argues, to my mind successfully, against options 1 and 2. Instead, he defends what he takes to be the only remaining option—option 3: the worldly construal of conceptual engineering. But the worldly construal of conceptual engineering is problematic for at least two reasons. Moreover, it is the austerity of Cappelen’s metasemantic framework that forces him to choose between the three options he identifies. The alternative, less austere metasemantic framework outlined toward the end of the previous section brings a fourth, much more palatable option into view. I deal with each of these considerations in turn.

The first reason that option 3 is problematic is that it threatens to undermine the very possibility of topic continuity that we were trying to accommodate. If the process of conceptual engineering changes, for example, what a belief is, and does so, as Cappelen says, by changing the conditions that have to be satisfied in order for an object to fall into the extension of the term “belief,” then the property of being a belief is not a stable objective property that exists independently of the conditions that we associate with the meaning of the term “belief.” Aside from its being intuitively false that conceptual engineering changes the nature of belief, knowledge, men, women, Latinos, etc., the worldly construal of conceptual



engineering undermines topic continuity by eradicating the possibility of a single topic—belief, knowledge, men, women, Latinos, etc.—that persists throughout the change.

The second reason that option 3 is problematic concerns statements such as “what a belief is has changed,” the truth of which are definitive of the worldly construal of conceptual engineering. The problem, as Cappelen recognizes, is that when we say “what a belief is has changed,” the semantic content of our utterance is false because on any given occasion of use, the term “belief” will have a stable meaning and, hence, a stable extension, and that stable extension could not, therefore, truly be said to have changed. As Cappelen says, “the conditions imposed on being in the extension are stable relative to all points of assessment” (139). Cappelen responds as follows:

What we say (or one of the propositions we say) when we utter a sentence can be true even though the proposition semantically expressed is false. In particular, a salient proposition in certain settings will be one where the intension of [“belief”] is variable—where, so to speak, what it takes to be a [belief] at  $t$  is different from what it takes to be a [belief] at  $t^*$  (and where these differences correspond to the different meanings [“belief”] had at  $t$  and  $t^*$ ). (139)<sup>9</sup>

He goes on to say:

... as soon as we allow saying to include contents beyond the semantic values (those that have changed), we can recognize additional contents that reflect the semantic changes—and there can be a plurality of such contents. None of these need to quote words and talk about their semantic values. (139)

I am happy to grant for the sake of the argument that each utterance expresses a large number of propositions only one of which is semantically expressed, but it is unclear how any of the additional propositions expressed by an utterance of “what a belief is has changed” could be true without being metalinguistic. What is needed, after all, is a kind of content that “reflect[s] semantic change” without mentioning the semantic entities (the words) that have undergone the change. Note that Cappelen’s own attempt to capture the salient proposition is manifestly metalinguistic. But unless an utterance of “what a belief is has changed” expresses a proposition which is true without being metalinguistic, the worldly construal of conceptual engineering is incoherent and, hence, untenable.

Finally, once we free ourselves from the constraints of Cappelen’s austere metasemantic framework and embrace the less austere metasemantic framework outlined toward the end of the previous section, a fourth, more palatable, option comes into view. The less austere metasemantic framework allows us to reject options 1 and 2: conceptual engineering is not about concepts, the constitutive principles for concepts, or the constitutive principles for concept possession, and it is not about the words of a specific language. It also allows us to agree with the first part of option 3: conceptual engineering is about the world in the sense of being about, for example, belief, marriage, rape, and persons. But it does so without committing us to the implausible and problematic claim that conceptual engineering involves changing what belief, marriage, rape, and persons *are*. On the contrary, conceptual engineering involves an individual or group of individuals purporting to point out that the community’s entrenched theory of belief, marriage, rape, and persons is mistaken, and trying to replace that theory with one which they take to be better (even if not ultimately correct).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup>I have substituted Cappelen’s example of “family” with the example of “belief” because the former, being an obviously social kind, detracts from the crucial concern about how a term—whether it be “family” or “belief”—could pick out a topic that is supposed to be constant and yet have changed.

<sup>10</sup>The notion of a theory’s being correct or incorrect may seem more applicable to theories concerning natural kinds such as atoms and whales than to theories concerning social kinds such as marriage and rape. I briefly note two points in response. First, it is plausibly topic continuity—which is taken to be central to projects in conceptual engineering—that legitimizes talk of correctness. Second, theories concerning social kinds are plausibly assessable as correct or incorrect because of the relation between social kinds and moral truths. Thus, the theory of rape according to which rape cannot occur within marriage is

The less austere metasemantic framework that I have suggested is based on the distinction between conventional linguistic norms and norms of thought that underpins externalism. It brings with it the corresponding distinction between meanings and concepts. I said earlier that these distinctions are not typically acknowledged by those who advocate externalism, despite the central role the distinctions play in Burge's own discussion of externalism. Cappelen is typical in this regard. He cites both "experts in the community" and "complex patterns of use over time" as well as "what the world happens to be like" (where this means what the world is like beyond linguistic practice) as elements of the external environment that partly determine extensions and intensions (63). But there is a tension between the claim that the extension of a term is determined by use (social practice), and the claim that the extension of a term depends on what the world happens to be like beyond linguistic practice. If the extension of a term is determined by use (social practice), then the extension of a term will change over time as the beliefs and dispositions of the community change. But if the extension of a term is determined by what the world happens to be like beyond linguistic practice, then the extension of a term will not change even if there is a radical shift in belief across the community as a whole. The worldly construal of conceptual engineering depends on running the two distinct elements together.<sup>11</sup>

The less austere metasemantic framework allows us to distinguish two different ways in which an ameliorative project might be thought to be successful. On the one hand, an ameliorative project might be thought to be successful in the sense that the proposed revisionary analysis is *accepted*, resulting in a change in the social practice surrounding the use of the relevant term. This sense of success is connected to the ameliorator having "won her case." On the other hand, an ameliorative project might be thought to be successful in the sense that the proposed revisionary analysis is *true*. This sense of success is connected to the ameliorator's revisionary analysis correctly characterizing the relevant subject matter, or topic. Clearly there can be acceptance without truth and truth without acceptance. In Cappelen's austere metasemantic framework, in contrast, these two ways in which an ameliorative project might be thought to be successful merge together; the worldly construal of conceptual engineering blurs acceptance and truth. According to the worldly construal, what it is to be a belief is determined by the conditions associated with the meaning of the term "belief," but the conditions associated with the meaning of the term "belief" are determined by communal use. This creates a hint of antirealism that runs through the entire project and which goes against the very spirit of externalism properly understood.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Cappelen's austere metasemantic framework, which invokes just one kind of representational device in its explanation of the phenomenon of conceptual engineering, is too austere to do the work required. In its place, I have suggested an alternative, less austere metasemantic framework that invokes two kinds of representational device: meanings and concepts. Cappelen is right to reject the claim that conceptual engineering is about language and he is right to reject the claim that conceptual engineering involves "fiddling with concepts" (146), but he is wrong to conclude that conceptual engineering can be explained without appeal to concepts at all. Concepts provide a basic representational relation to objective properties and, hence, to topics, about which we may, as individuals, fundamentally disagree and about which society at large may be fundamentally mistaken.

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incorrect because it gets the moral facts about, for example, property and consent wrong. I do not have the space to elaborate on the connection between social kinds and moral truths here, but hope to do so on a future occasion.

<sup>11</sup>Cappelen does recognize that "any good theory of the role of experts should be compatible with the fact that experts can be wrong. . . . So even if the experts agree, say, that only *G*s are in the extension of the predicate "*F*," it doesn't follow that they are right" (77). This recognition is unusual, but it is not developed and is in tension with his worldly construal of conceptual engineering.

Projects in conceptual engineering are not attempts to change the nonlinguistic world but rather attempts to rectify what are perceived to be mistaken understandings of it.

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