

Conceptual Engineering

The Ethics and Politics of Meaning Production

Book Proposal for Oxford University Press

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Overview

Suppose you could change people's way of thinking about the world at its very roots. What we have in mind is something that cuts deep, right down to the very constituents of thought. Suppose that you could bring about changes in people's way of thinking about the world by changing the very concepts by means of which they think. Suppose, further, that this would make the world a better place; that would be quite something.

Conceptual engineering is concerned with this remarkable kind of feat. Within conceptual engineering, we can distinguish between three main lines of inquiry. The first concerns foundational issues having to do with the very possibility of conceptual engineering. Pessimists think that conceptual engineering cannot be done. And even among optimists, there is a remarkable variety in terms of how hard conceptual engineering is taken to be. The options here are ranging from very cautious to wholehearted optimists. Another, related question concerns the scope of conceptual engineering. A lot of the literature has focused on projects aimed at fixing defective concepts. But it is a live question as to whether conceptual engineering can go beyond this. For instance, we may ask whether we can engage in conceptual engineering projects for concepts that are not defective but can be improved upon. And we can also ask a question about conceptual innovation, i.e. whether we can bring into existence new concepts.

A second foundational line of inquiry concerns conceptual ethics. Even if the answers to the questions about the possibility and the scope of conceptual engineering are positive, there are further

questions about the normativity of conceptual engineering. For instance, cautious optimists will face the question as to whether we should engage in conceptual engineering at all. Given how hard it is, it may be that it is just not worth the effort. And there will also be questions for more wholeheartedly optimists about conceptual engineering. Might the potential costs, or even the fact that we cannot foresee all the costs provide sufficient reason to refrain from conceptual engineering? Is it permissible to engage in conceptual engineering no matter what the reason for doing so may be or are there substantive restrictions on the reasons for which it is alright to engage?

Finally, the third line of inquiry in conceptual engineering takes the form of applied, hands-on conceptual interventions. Here we are thinking about specific concepts that may be targets for conceptual engineering, and specific proposals for engineering these concepts. For example, the concept of woman has been the notable target of conceptual engineering proposals. Women have historically suffered systematic injustices, with the result that women have come to occupy a subordinated position in society along several dimensions. Now, one of the sources of injustices against and continued subordination of women is the very use of the term 'woman' and the associated concept of woman. They already perpetuate injustices against women, for instance by perpetuating a world view of which these injustices are part and parcel. Conceptual engineering projects have ventured to engineer the concept of woman with the aim of rectifying these injustices and making the world a more just place. While this is the perhaps most widely discussed example in the literature, the number of hands-on conceptual engineering projects has increased significantly in recent years.

The central aim of this book is to develop a functionalist approach to conceptual engineering that is wholeheartedly optimistic. In that it takes conceptual engineering to be something that we can do and should do. In fact, we argue, it's not even distinctively difficult to do it. What's more, the account is also optimistic when it comes to the questions of scope. It argues that our conceptual engineering projects can go beyond fixing defective concepts and will allow for improving non-defective concepts as well.

While we think that there is reason for optimism when it comes to conceptual ethics as well, in that we should indeed engage in conceptual engineering, the book will also provide reason to think that not everything goes here. In particular, we will argue that conceptual engineering projects will only be all-things-considered permissible when they do not incur representational loss. Compatibly, we will argue, we often shoulder conceptual obligations – i.e. obligations to produce new representational devices, in virtue of hermeneutical needs.

Finally, the book will put the functionalist machinery to work, to the aim of showing its practical strength. The last part of the book contributes to the hands-on literature putting forth concrete conceptual engineering projects by discussing three case studies of conceptual engineering in the service of, respectively: social justice, democratic participation, and the law. To this aim, it will first engage with the debate on conceptual engineering of the concept of woman and will defend a novel view according to which we should opt for linguistic innovation instead. It will then also break new ground in that it will develop proposals for conceptual engineering of the concepts of voting and evidence.

Background to the Book

While conceptual engineering in its contemporary form originated in the middle of the 20th century, largely due to Carnap's work on explication, interest in the topic has exploded in the 2010s. And while there has been a flurry of publications, the number of book-length treatments of the conceptual engineering remains surprisingly small. This book will provide the first monograph of one of the most popular approaches to conceptual engineering, i.e. a distinctively functionalist one.

The book will, to some extent, build on previous research, by systematizing and unifying it. Crucially, however, the book will also include new material (50%). Here are the main papers on which the book will draw:

1. Simion, M. and Kelp, C. 2019. *Conceptual Innovation, Function First. Noûs*.
2. Simion, M. 2017. The 'Should' in Conceptual Engineering. *Inquiry*, Vol. 61/8.
3. Simion, M. (2022). The Ethics and Politics of Meaning Production. R&R at *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.
4. Simion, M. (Forthcoming). *Conceptual Engineering*. Carnap Handbuch, (Christian Damböck and Georg Schiemer, eds.) Metzler Verlag.
5. Simion, M. 2019. Hermeneutical Injustice as Basing Failure. In Bondy, P. and Carter, J.A. (eds.), *Well Founded Belief: New Essays on the Epistemic Basing Relation*, Routledge.
6. Simion, M. Forthcoming. *Engineering Evidence. New Perspectives on Conceptual Engineering* (eds. M.G. Isaac and K. Scharp), Springer.

Chapter Summary

Introduction

This chapter sets the stage for the book and introduces the key ideas that the book explores.

Part 1: Conceptual Engineering: Foundational Issues

Chapter 1: Conceptual Engineering: Repair, Replacement, Negotiation

This chapter does two things. First, it offers a brief survey of the field, tracing it back to Carnap's explication, by focusing on the main research questions pursued. Second, it explores the various shapes that conceptual engineering can take, including repair, replacement, negotiation, and innovation, as well as the various objects that may be the targets of conceptual engineering, including words, meanings, and concepts. It also introduces several central foundational questions about conceptual engineering and develops a taxonomy for pessimistic and optimistic approaches to conceptual engineering depending on how these questions are answered. Finally, the chapter

introduces the functionalist approach to conceptual engineering that the remainder of the book will pursue.

Chapter 2: Against Conceptual Engineering

This chapter focuses on sceptical arguments aimed to show that conceptual engineering is not possible. It introduces the famous charge that conceptual engineering amounts to changing the subject, that conceptual engineering leads to an unacceptable form of proliferation of engineering projects, that conceptual engineering cannot be squared with semantic externalism, that there cannot be success conditions for conceptual engineering projects, and that there is simply no good track record of successful conceptual engineering projects. In this way, this chapter develops a set of desiderata for a theory of conceptual engineering. Any adequate account of conceptual engineering had better provide viable solutions to these problems.

Chapter 3: Conceptual Innovation

The central aim of this chapter is to argue not only that conceptual engineering is possible but also that it is not even distinctively hard. In order to achieve this, we will develop a novel approach to conceptual engineering that has two key components. First, it proposes a reorientation of the conceptual engineering project away from fixing conceptual defects and towards bringing about conceptual innovation. Second, it offers a new account of when conceptual engineering is successful in terms of etiological functions. We then turn to the arguments that conceptual engineering is impossible and show that, on our novel approach, none of them stands up to scrutiny.

Part 2: Conceptual Ethics and Conceptual Epistemology

Chapter 4: The 'Should' in Conceptual Engineering

This chapter focuses on the normative limits of conceptual engineering. We 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, we

also identify a limitation to the optimistic claim: we show that the ‘should’ in ameliorative projects suffers from a ‘wrong-kind-of-reasons’ problem. Last but not least, we sketch a proposal of normative constraining meant to address both the above results.

Chapter 5: Expressive Power and Hermeneutical Injustice

This chapter discusses and defends a novel view of hermeneutical injustice (HI), i.e. the kind of injustice that renders epistemic agents incapable of interpreting their experiences due to conceptual lacks and deficiencies. To this effect, it starts by arguing that Miranda Fricker’s account is of HI too restrictive: hermeneutical injustice is, alas, more ubiquitous than her account allows. That is because, *contra* Fricker, conceptual ignorance is not necessary for HI: hermeneutical injustice essentially involves, we argue, a failure in concept application rather than in concept possession. We show that, if this view right, HI is a form of conceptual distributive injustice, and affords the corresponding traditional normative theorizing.

Chapter 6: Expressive Power and the Ethics of Meaning Production

This chapter a fully-fledged account of the ethics of meaning production. Unsurprisingly, the account is functionalist: we propose that a linguistic community has an obligation to generate a particular representational device insofar as there is a categorical need of an increase in expressive power in the community at stake, which would thereby be alleviated, there is capacity to generate the representational device in question, and there are no overriding reasons against doing so; in turn, categorical needs are unpacked as pertaining to proper cognitive functioning.

Part III: Hands-On Conceptual Engineering: Three Case Studies

Chapter 7: She’s a She: Linguistic Innovation for Sexual Justice

This chapter explores the political prospects of linguistic innovation for gender terms. It develops and defends a model that leaves the concept of woman in place but replaces the term with a novel one that lacks the problematic social and political connotations. It is shown that

linguistic innovation reaps all the political benefits of competing, conceptual engineering proposals, without any of the downsides.

Chapter 8: Engineering Voting as Informative Speech Act

We argue that our current conception of the nature of voting is incompatible with its constitutive role in democratic exercise and propose to think of voting as an informative speech act with normative content. In turn, this speech act informs collective democratic decision making. As such, we argue, democratic voting is constitutively governed by an epistemic norm: an exercise with too widely spread and too systematic breach of the epistemic norm at stake is not an exercise in democratic voting.

Chapter 9: Engineering Evidence

Traditional philosophical accounts of evidence (having to do with being in a particular state of mind), conflict sharply with the way the concept is often employed in non-philosophical contexts, such as e.g. the law, journalism, and scientific practice, (as being in the presence of probability raisers). The philosophical account is too agent-centric to account for irrational evidence resistance, while the folk account is too agent-neutral to account for cognitive fallibility. This chapter is an exercise in unification: it proposes to engineer a novel conception of evidence had as available facts that raise the probability of knowledge. This view, it is argued, has the capacity to play the roles it needs to play both within and outside philosophy.

Market

The book promises to make a novel and timely contribution to the literature. The audience for this volume would primarily be academics and research students working in Philosophy. Conceptual engineering is a hot, growing field, and the authors are among the main contributors to this growing literature. In this, the book is bound to generate very high levels of interest.

The book will also serve as a valuable research resource for students at both undergraduate and postgraduate level who work on related areas within Philosophy (e.g., the philosophy of language, methodology, general normativity theory). Given the centrality of the

topics covered to contemporary philosophical debate, and its importance for a number of areas of analytical philosophy, it is anticipated that this book will prove very popular anywhere where analytical philosophy is prominent – i.e., particularly in the North American, European, and Australasian markets.

The Competition

Stricto sensu, there is very little competition for this book: this is the first book-length defence of a full functionalist picture for conceptual engineering and conceptual ethics. Even if we conceive of the topic more broadly – as having to do with conceptual engineering simpliciter, the main competition for this book is:

Monographs

Cappelen, H. (2018). *Fixing Language: An Essay in Conceptual Engineering*. Oxford University Press.

Eklund, M. (2017). *Choosing Normative Concepts*. Oxford University Press.

Haslanger, S. (2012). *Social Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*. Oxford University Press.

Sharp, K. (2013). *Replacing Truth*. Oxford University Press.

Edited Volumes

Burgess, A., Cappelen, H., and Plunkett, D. (eds.) (2020). *Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics*. Oxford University Press.

Isaac, M. and Sharp, K. (eds.) (Forthcoming). *New Perspectives on Conceptual Engineering*. Springer.

Format and Timeline

The manuscript is expected to be around 60000 words including notes and references. It is not expected to contain any diagrams, illustrations or tables. I expect the turnaround for this book to be about one year

and a half. So, for example, if we decided to go ahead with this project in early 2023, then it would be complete in late 2024.

About the Authors

Mona Simion is Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Cogito Epistemology Research Centre at the University of Glasgow, UK. Her research focuses on epistemology, philosophy of language, moral and political philosophy, and the philosophy of gender and race, as well as their intersection. She is the author of two monographs that draw on resources from all these fields: *'Shifty Speech and Independent Thought: Epistemic Normativity in Context'* (Oxford University Press) and *'Sharing Knowledge: A Functionalist Account of Assertion'* (with C. Kelp, Cambridge University Press). She is also the editor of *'Reasons, Justification, and Defeat'* (with J. Brown, OUP 2021). She has more than seventy articles and book chapters published in internationally leading journals, such as *Noûs*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, and *The Journal of Philosophy*, and in anthologies of prestigious publishing houses such as OUP and CUP. She is also the winner of the 2021 Young Epistemologist Prize.

Christoph Kelp is Professor of Philosophy and Deputy Director of the Cogito Epistemology Research Centre at the University of Glasgow, UK. His research focuses on issues in epistemology, the philosophy of language, ethics, the philosophy of science, and their intersection. He has published widely, including three monographs – *Good Thinking: A Knowledge First Virtue Epistemology* (Routledge 2018), *Sharing Knowledge: A Functionalist Account of Assertion* (CUP 2021, with M. Simion), and *Inquiry, Knowledge, and Understanding* (OUP 2021) – an edited volume – *Virtue Theoretic Epistemology: New Methods and Approaches* (CUP 2021, with J. Greco) – and over seventy articles in leading journals, including *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, *Noûs*, and the *Journal of Philosophy*, and in anthologies of prestigious publishing houses such as OUP and CUP. He is also the winner of the 2017 Young Epistemologist Prize.

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