

Philosophy and Defective Concepts

Replacing Truth

About a year and a half ago, I published a book in which I carry out the following project: make sense of the liar paradox and other terrible paradoxes associated with truth as symptoms of an underlying defect in the concept of truth itself. And then replace our defective concept of truth with a pair of concepts that together will do some of the jobs we try to use truth to do. These jobs include explaining the meanings or contents of natural language sentences by way of natural language semantics, which in a very popular form attributes truth conditions to each sentence. Because of the family of paradoxes affecting truth, it simply cannot do this job well. But the replacement concepts, which I call ascending truth and descending truth, can do it perfectly. And the resulting theory agrees with truth conditional semantics as a special case everywhere the latter provides coherent results. I called my method *conceptual engineering*, which I take to be actively changing some aspect of our concepts—eliminating bad ones, adding new ones, deciding which ones we should use and which words should express them. Although one can see plenty of instances of it in the history of philosophy, I have borrowed the term from Simon Blackburn (in *Think*).

I have come to think that conceptual engineering can and should play a much larger role in philosophical theorizing. Indeed, I have come to think that most, if not all commonly discussed philosophical concepts are inconsistent—some in the same way as truth and others in more subtle ways. As such I have come to think that philosophy is, for the most part, the study of what have turned out to be inconsistent concepts. That is, philosophical concepts have constitutive principles that are inconsistent with each other and with obvious facts about the world. These concepts include truth, knowledge, nature, meaning, virtue, explanation, essence, causation, validity, rationality, freedom, necessity, person, beauty, belief, goodness, time, space, justice, etc.

The Role of Conceptual Engineering

One way to flesh out this picture of philosophy and arrive at a legitimate philosophical methodology is to appeal to Socrates, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein.

Socrates (early Platonic): The unexamined life is not worth living, and by this he means the life bereft of critical thinking (i.e., subjecting one's beliefs to critical scrutiny).

Nietzsche: In the absence of any divine or objective standards for human life, we ought to craft our own. One ought to take an active role in creating the structure of one's life.

Wittgenstein: Philosophical problems are manifestations of being trapped by our language, and philosophy should take the form of therapy that ultimately dissolves the philosophical problems. The aim of philosophy is to show the fly the way out of the fly bottle.

Conceptual engineering is taking a Socratic (critical) and Nietzschean (active) attitude toward one's own conceptual scheme. Many of us already think that we should take this critical and active attitude toward our beliefs. We should subject them to a battery of objections and see how well we can reply to those objections. If a belief does not fare well in this process, then that is a good indicator that it should be changed. By doing this, one can sculpt and craft a belief system of one's own rather than just living one's life with beliefs borrowed from one's ancestors. The central idea of conceptual engineering is that one ought to take the same critical attitude toward one's concepts. Likewise, if a concept does not fare well under critical scrutiny, the active attitude kicks in and one crafts new concepts that do the work one wants without giving rise to the problems inherent in the old ones. By doing this, one can sculpt and craft a conceptual repertoire of one's own rather than just living one's life with concepts borrowed from one's ancestors. As Burgess and Plunkett write, "our conceptual repertoire determines not only what we can think and say but also, as a result, what we can do and who we can be," ("Conceptual Ethics I," p. 1091).

I see conceptual engineering as in the service of an overarching therapeutic program. Wittgenstein's infamous conservatism is no part of this program because I think that some things are *not* fine as they are. Our beliefs are not fine. Our concepts are not fine. But we can make them better. However, the radical therapeutic program does share with Wittgenstein's methodology the goal of showing the fly the way out of the fly bottle. How can conceptual engineering help? Consider the thesis that philosophy is the study of what turned out to be inconsistent concepts. Putting this idea into the Wittgensteinian program results in the following picture: philosophers are arguing about how best to make sense of concepts that are inconsistent. The arguments consist in privileging certain constitutive principles here and others there, but ultimately the debates rarely make discernable progress because the concepts being analyzed and the concepts used to conduct the debate are defective. That is one reason philosophers end up dealing with so many paradoxes and conceptual puzzles. That is the fly bottle.

How do we escape? For the past 400 years, philosophy has been shrinking. That is a sociological fact. Physics, geology, chemistry, economics, biology, anthropology, sociology, meteorology, psychology, linguistics, computer science, cognitive science—these subject matters were all part of philosophy in 1600. As the scientific revolution ground on, more and more sciences were born. This process is essentially philosophy outsourcing its subject matter as something new—sciences. The process is rather complicated, but the most important part of it is getting straight on the right concepts to use so that the subject matter can be brought under scientific methodology. Ultimately, the radical therapeutic program – showing the fly the way out of the fly bottle – is taking an active role in this outsourcing process. Identify conceptual defects (Socratic idea) and craft new concepts that avoid the old defects (Nietzschean idea) with an eye toward preparing that philosophical subject matter for outsourcing as a science. The ultimate goal of this process is the *potential* end of philosophy – escape for the fly. The end of philosophy is merely potential because it is likely that our new technologies will give us new inconsistent concepts that are philosophically significant, and these will need to get sorted out. So it is not obvious that our stock of defective concepts will ever effectively decrease. It really depends on how much conceptual engineering occurs. Speeding it up is up to us (philosophers). The speed with which we get new defective concepts is mostly not up to us—people just make them up as needed or wanted. Nevertheless, one can envision a world where we have succeeded in making philosophy evaporate, but some time after that, it shows up again with new, philosophically significant defective concepts. After that, philosophy might break out during especially rapid technological or social growth, like acne.

The scientific element in this radical therapeutic picture is called metrological naturalism, and it is separable from the conceptual engineering element. However, the two go together well: metrological naturalism is more successful with consistent concepts, and in order to do conceptual engineering well, we need to know what kinds of replacement concepts to aim for. So it seems that metrological naturalism without conceptual engineering is empty; conceptual engineering without metrological naturalism is blind.

Contrast this radical therapeutic picture centered on conceptual engineering with what is probably the most prominent methodology in contemporary philosophy—the Canberra plan, which owes much to the work of David Lewis. One begins by assembling the platitudes for a philosophical term, and then one tries to figure out what real, relatively fundamental, thing they might describe. If the platitudes are inconsistent, then one tries to make a weighted majority of them true, and that is what the philosophical term in question designates. This methodology is static, having nothing to do with change or improvement. Indeed, Lewis writes: “One comes to philosophy already endowed with a stock of opinions. It is not the business of philosophy either to undermine or to justify these preexisting opinions, to any great extent, but only to try to discover ways of expanding them into an orderly system.” (1973: 88).

Conceptual Engineering Projects

Amelioration is a philosophical project advocated by Sally Haslanger, and it is also a conceptual engineering project, but it is not a conceptual revision project. Sally Haslanger advocates changing what we mean by certain key terms for social justice reasons. For example, ‘woman’ currently expresses something like the concept *adult human female*, but Haslanger argues that ‘woman’ is used primarily to subordinate people based on their stereotypical femal

characteristics. She suggests that woman should instead be used to express something like the concept *person subordinated based on stereotypical female characteristics*. The goal of this ameliorative project is to fight the subordination of women by making the subordination explicit in the concept expressed by ‘woman’.

There are many conceptual engineering projects in contemporary metaphysics (e.g., the development of grounding and fundamentality to replace modal notions and Sider’s concept of structure as a generalization of Lewisian naturalness), but one in particular concerns the idea that some or all metaphysical disputes are pointless (or meaningless or nonsubstantive or merely verbal), which has appeared repeatedly over the past century of analytic philosophy. Those who advocate this position, called metaphysical deflationists, have some sophisticated tools with which to formulate and defend it. Probably the most well known is quantifier variance—the view that there are multiple equally good interpretations of what people mean by the existential quantifier involved in formulating ontological questions and theses. Those engaged in ontological disputes where quantifier variance is true are simply talking past one another, and the deflationist argues that this is the case for most or all ontological questions and theses. Although metaphysicians have some strong objections to quantifier variance in particular and metaphysical deflationism in general, some of them have proposed a new kind of strategy for conducting metaphysical disputes just in case the deflationists turn out to be right. The strategy, called *Plan B* by Ted Sider, who is one of its primary advocates, is to give up on using natural languages like English for doing ontology and instead stipulate a fundamental meaning for an existential quantifier in a new language, often called *Ontologese*, and conduct ontological disputes using it. Cian Dorr and Ross Cameron are other advocates of Plan B type conceptual engineering.

Metrological Naturalism

Methodological (scientific) naturalism: in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things. Scientific methods are the only reliable route to true beliefs, but scientific results are fallible. Philosophy should be continuous with the sciences in two senses: (i) science does not require justification or grounding from philosophy, and (ii) science and philosophy should pursue similar goals and employ similar methods.

Problems for methodological naturalism:

- It seems like many of the things a naturalist says are not scientific (e.g., no science concludes that science is the only road to truth).
- There is no consensus on what demarcates science from non-science.
- There is no consensus on the nature of scientific methodology (observation, hypothesis, prediction, experiment).
- Many philosophical topics are abstract, and so resist scientific methods (e.g., observation, prediction and experimentation).
- Scientific methods aim for descriptive results, but many philosophical topics are normative.

The version of methodological naturalism I want to propose focuses on measurement theory. The Greek word for ‘measure’ is μέτρον (*metron*), hence a measurement-theoretic methodological naturalism could be called *metrological naturalism*.

The big idea from the scientific revolution is that we can use mathematics to describe, predict, and explain natural phenomena. In the late 1800s, theorists turned their attention to providing a scientific understanding of how mathematics is applied in this way—the result is measurement theory. It can be thought of as an all-purpose foundation for the scientific theorizing in much the same way as set theory is a foundation for mathematics. Metrological naturalism is the methodological principle that philosophers should use measurement theory as a guide or model in philosophical theorizing.

Metrological naturalism states that philosophers ought to draw on the resources of the sciences in philosophical theorizing. There are many ways one can follow this advice. Here are three:

1. Cast one's philosophical theories of X as measurement systems for X, where 'X' is replaced by a central philosophical term (truth, knowledge, nature, meaning, virtue, ...). That requires an account of measurement systems. Example: a proper theory of truth is a measurement system for truth.
2. Focus on semantic theories of X locutions rather than analyses of X; the latter almost always fail. Arriving at a proper understanding of the semantics for some central philosophical term is often a good way to cut through the clutter associated with traditional philosophical theorizing about it. Example: reasons. Getting straight on the semantics for reasons locutions can help tremendously in assessing traditional philosophical debates about reasons—e.g., the debate between factualists and mentalists.
3. Utilize the tools of measurement theory for answering philosophical questions. Example: invariance and symmetry can be used to make sense of the distinction between objective and subjective features. Various philosophers have emphasized this as well—Nozick, Daston and Galison, and Debs on objectivity and invariance.

Features of metrological naturalism:

- It says nothing about the methods one uses to arrive at or justify philosophical theories. So metrological naturalism is not opposed to apriori methods (e.g., intuitions, deductions) in philosophy.
- It is not opposed to apriori philosophical claims. In fact, it is plausible to think that certain aspects of a measurement system for some concept will be constitutive of that concept.
- It does not offer analyses or necessary and sufficient conditions for concept application.
- It does not offer reductive explanations in any sense (except perhaps the weakest forms of supervenience).
- It is not a metaphysical thesis about what exists or does not exist.
- It does not need a leading science, a criterion for what demarcates science from non-science, or an account of scientific methodology.
- It is applicable to abstract topics (e.g., one can do measurement theory for mathematics and logic).
- It is applicable to normative topics (e.g., formal axiology).

Constraints on Conceptual Engineering Projects

Imagine the following argument:

The pro-choice position and the anti infanticide position are right ones to have with respect to abortion and infanticide. Assume those are my practical commitments. Furthermore, when I reflect on the nature of time, I find myself committed to the idea that I do not have temporal parts—I am wholly present (metaphysically) at every moment. If so, then I am an endurantist, and presumably I am an endurantist about a zygote/infant, which is the thing that is wholly present throughout the change from having no rights (as a zygote) to having rights (as an infant). So far, so good, but now I start thinking about metaethics and theories of justice, and I arrive at the plausible view that rights are properties had by objects and that our judicial locutions denote these properties. Now I think about it a bit more and I find it difficult to believe that having rights is not an intrinsic property of an entity if one is a realist about rights. So now I have a problem making sense of how a single thing could be intrinsically killable at one time (as a zygote) and then not intrinsically killable later on (as an infant). Now I need to think hard about which concepts of time, persistence, and justice I should use to given my commitments to prochoice/anti-infanticide positions.

Should I change what I mean by 'rights' or 'time' or 'persist' in light of these considerations? Just to be clear, I am not attributing this project to Haslanger or anyone else. Instead, I am trying to think through the kinds of conditions one might want on acceptable conceptual engineering projects. Here is one way to think about it. I surely have a reason to do so, but this is the wrong kind of reason. That is, my reason for changing what concept I express by one of these terms is not a reason to think that the new concept is a good one. As such, I am rather uneasy about this kind of conceptual engineering project.