

Ideology and Normativity:
Constraints on Conceptual Engineering

Paul-Mikhail Catapang Podosky

UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

Where do the boundaries of the ‘should’ in conceptual engineering lie? Mona Simion (2017) suggests that the right kind of reason for an ameliorative project is *epistemic*: revising a concept should not come at the cost of epistemic loss. In this paper I argue that Simion’s epistemic constraint on conceptual engineering fails to make sense of important ameliorative projects. In virtue of the interdependence of thought and reality, sometimes conceptual engineering aims at epistemic loss. Given this, I offer an amendment of Simion’s epistemic constraint: epistemic loss is permissible in cases where the ameliorated concept has the capacity to causally influence the world, and can therefore make itself representationally accurate. I call this the *Epistemic Limiting Procedure+* (ELP+). At the end of the paper, I suggest that we should examine a further question about the normative boundaries of ameliorative projects: What are the *feasibility* constraints on conceptual engineering?

1. Introduction

Conceptual engineering is a field of normative inquiry that aims to evaluate concepts, and to determine whether they should be revised, removed, or replaced.¹ In recent time, there has been growing curiosity for where the theoretical boundaries of ameliorative projects lie. Mona Simion (2017) suggests that while much attention has been focused on the *metaphysical* limits of conceptual engineering², inquiry into its *normative* constraints has been largely overlooked. Simion asks: What are the limits of the ‘*should*’ in conceptual engineering? Her response: Ameliorative projects have been far too modest; and unjustifiably so. Instead of focusing squarely on remedying dysfunctional representational devices, Simion suggests that conceptual engineers are well placed to take on the more ambitious goal of *conceptual improvement*. To this end, I agree with Simion – conceptual engineers should not *just* be interested in fixing bad concepts, but also improving those that work reasonably well. Nevertheless, I object to Simion’s next claim. That is, amelioration is normatively constrained by the *Epistemic Limiting Procedure* (ELP). This suggests that the right kind of reason for conceptual engineering is ultimately epistemic; specifically, amelioration should not result in epistemic loss.

What follows is an argument against ELP as it stands. I suggest that if conceptual engineers are bound by knowledge preservation, then this poses a threat to meaningful conceptual normative inquiry. Importantly, I will argue that when it comes to socially and politically dysfunctional concepts, conceptual engineering is often *about* epistemic loss. This is because *ideology* serves to create social reality; it makes certain facts true. And ideology consists of concepts. Hence, ideological concepts are *accurate* because they constitute social reality. Given that ideology is *oppressive*, then it appears that primacy should not be given to knowledge preservation. Despite the accuracy of ideological concepts, we should not preserve them if they perpetuate oppression, no matter the epistemic cost.

¹ For inquiries of this kind, see Railton (1986); Clark and Chalmers (1998); Haslanger (2000, 2012); Joyce (2005); Scharp (2007, 2013).

² See Haslanger (2000); Burgess and Plunkett (2013a, 2013b); Eklund (2017); Prizing (2017); Greenough (2017); Cappelen (2018); Thomasson (forthcoming).

Thus, one might conclude that the right kind of reason for conceptual engineering is not (always) epistemic. However, following Simion, I accept that the proper functioning of a concept is that it is responsive to epistemic reasons. As such, I suggest that epistemic normative constraints on conceptual engineering should be sensitive to certain facts about social structure. I argue that ELP should be revised to allow the permissibility of ameliorative projects in cases where the revised concept has the capacity to causally influence the world, and can therefore make itself representationally accurate. I call this the *Epistemic Limiting Procedure+* (ELP+).

2. The Epistemic Limiting Procedure

Simion argues that conceptual engineers should be ambitious; they should seek to improve all concepts, if there is all-things-considered reason to do so. The question then is, what should factor into our all-things-considered reasoning with respect to conceptual revision? After all, ‘not just any improvement seems to have the necessary normative strength to support the amelioration ambition’ (Simion 2017, 9).

Thus, to distinguish between the right and wrong kind of conceptual improvement, Simion refers to the literature on *the-wrong-kind-of-reasons* problem. Roughly, a reason is the wrong kind when it counts in favor of some action or attitude, but does not bear on whether the action or attitude is valuable. For example, if S offers T a million dollars to believe that the sky is green, T has all-things-considered reason to believe that the sky is green. However, given a lack of justification, this belief is badly formed. ‘Prudential reasons are the wrong kind of reasons for belief, no matter what is all-things-considered required in the context’ (Simion 2017, 9).

In response to this, some have suggested that reasons are of the wrong kind for belief if they do not pertain to the central function(s) of belief. Belief is a mental state, and as such its central function is epistemic. It is for representing the world. Hence, beliefs will be ‘proper functioning when responsive to reasons that bear on this function, i.e. on epistemic reasons’ (Simion 2017, 9).³ In other words, because belief functions to represent the world, then belief will malfunction if it is responsive to anything other than epistemic reasons, all-things-considered.

³ For more, see Graham (2012); Simion (2017).

Simion extends this reasoning to apply to concepts. She suggests that,

Concepts, just like belief, are representational devices, their function is an epistemic one: to represent the world. In virtue of this function, concepts will be properly functioning when responsive to epistemic reasons, and malfunctioning when responsive to practical reasons. Concepts will be good concepts *qua* concepts when they are epistemically good (Simion 2017, 10).

Hence, what counts as a legitimate ameliorative project, according to Simion, will be normatively constrained by epistemic reasons:

The Epistemic Limiting Procedure (ELP): A representational device should be ameliorated iff (1) There is all-things-considered reason to do so and (2) The amelioration does not translate into epistemic loss (Simion 2017, 10).

For Simion, conceptual engineering is limited by the normative constraint that ‘in the process of revising the concept, we do not end up with less knowledge about the world’ (Simion 2017, 11). Thus, conceptual engineers can undertake amelioration for moral, political, or practical reasons, however such reasons cannot legitimize conceptual revision that ‘obscures our view of the world’ (Simion 2017, 11). Put more roundly, engineering must not come at the cost of epistemic loss.

In what follows, I will suggest that ELP cannot make sense of meaningful conceptual engineering projects that are *about* epistemic loss. That is, often it is the case that for social and political concepts, their involvement in the creation of unjust social structure means that they must be revised. However, such revision results in loss of knowledge. Nevertheless, this is, in part, the aim of the revision. If ELP fails to account for ameliorative projects of this kind, then it fails to account for perhaps the most important forms of conceptual engineering. Hence, in order to provide epistemic constraints I suggest that Simion’s ELP should be revised with the condition that there be no all-things-considered epistemic reason to refrain from amelioration. Moreover, epistemic loss does not give us all-things-considered epistemic reason to refrain from

amelioration in cases where the revised concept has the capacity to causally influence the world, and can make itself representationally accurate.

Before I get to this, I will first discuss how concepts contribute to the creation of social structure, and that in virtue of this conceptual engineering is often about epistemic loss.

3. Ideology Makes Itself True

What is ideology? Roughly, ideologies are representations of social reality that serve to govern the practices of agents embedded in social structure. More precisely, Sally Haslanger suggests that ideology is ‘the background cognitive and affective frame that gives actions and reactions meaning within a social system and contributes to its survival’ (Haslanger 2012a, 447). In other words, we enact ideology, and ‘how we represent the world is both a *constitutive part* of that enactment and *keeps it going*’ (Haslanger 2012b, 411). What’s more, as I’ll understand it, ideology is *oppressive*. It is a representation that privileges some, and subordinates others. Let’s unpack all of this.

The background cognitive and affective frame consists of what Haslanger calls *schemas*.⁴ Broadly speaking, ‘schemas are clusters of culturally shared (public) *concepts*⁵... that enables us, collectively, to interpret and organize information and coordinate action, thought, and affect’ (Haslanger 2015, 4 my emphasis).⁶ Schemas are representational devices that encode information, and serve as the basis of social activity.

The function of a schema is to interpret an aspect of the world as a *resource*. Resources can be anything that is taken to have value i.e., moral, practical, political, religious, etc. (Haslanger 2016, 126) – for example, through the use of different schemas, we interpret figurines as either toys or collector’s items. Once an aspect of the world has been interpreted, individuals are disposed to interact with this aspect of the world, and coordinate behavior with others, in response to this shared interpretation.

⁴ This concept is borrowed from the social sciences. For more, see Howard (1994); Sewell (1992); Zadwinski (2013).

⁵ Henceforth, I will use ‘schema’ and ‘concept’ interchangeably.

⁶ Haslanger also speaks of schema as involving norms, propositions, beliefs, etc. For this paper, I focus squarely on concepts.

Forthcoming in *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*

Dispositional patterns of behavior is a *practice*, and entrenched practices are *social relations*. Systems of interdependent practices/relations are *social structures*.⁷ Finally, ideology consists of the schemas that are constitutive of *oppressive* social structure; the schemas that guide practices and constitute the social world that privileges some, and disadvantages others.

I won't have much to say about what counts as something being unjust. Instead, I will just point out a number of structural injustices: Women are oppressed by sexism; PoC are oppressed by racism; nonhuman animals are oppressed by carnism; disabled people are oppressed by ableism; and so on. What I will say is *how* such oppression comes about.

Haslanger suggests that social structure imposes constraints on the agency of individuals. The actions, thoughts, and emotions an agent can enact are dependent on access to schemas that provide interpretations of the world – schemas govern practices. Social structures are oppressive when the constraints on agency *enables* some, but *subordinates* others. Consider the following case offered by Haslanger:

“Imagine a couple, Larry and Lisa, who we suppose are equally intelligent, talented, educated, and experienced in the workplace; they have equal power in the their relationship, have no prejudices about gender roles, and are equally capable of all domestic tasks and childrearing tasks. Larry and Lisa decide to have children; baby Lulu arrives. They live in a community where decent childcare is beyond their means. Moreover, let's suppose that in this community, as elsewhere, there is a wage gap: women, on average, make only 75% of what men make. Under these conditions, unless Larry and Lisa have special reasons to think that they are unusual in their earning capacities, it is reasonable for Larry to work full-time and for Lisa to make adjustments in her work, e.g., to work part-time, to take time off, to take a less demanding job. But in our society, “*wealth determines power, domestic work is unpaid, and divorce laws do not evenly divide wealth*” (Cudd 2006, 149). So Larry accrues greater human capital and ends up with more power in the relationship. Moreover, insofar as Larry and Lisa are typical, women on average will be poorer risks for employers

⁷ Haslanger has written a lot on schemas and their contribution to creating, sustaining, and maintaining unjust social structure. See Haslanger (2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2015, 2016).

Forthcoming in *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*

who will “tend not to trust that women will stay with their careers or that if they do, they will devote the kind of time and energy to them that men will” (Cudd 2006, 149). As a result, “women’s jobs” that require less commitment, mobility, and experience will pay less, and women will have to prove themselves exceptional to be considered for high paying “men’s jobs”. As a result, the pattern is reinforced (Cudd 2006, 148 - 151).” (Haslanger 2016, 122 - 123).

Owing to interpretations of what it is to be a ‘man’, say being a ‘breadwinner’, Larry is able to participate in structures that contributes to gaining power and status; he can work, accrue wealth, and create an unjust hierarchical relation over Lisa. The constraints imposed on Larry’s agency is enabling. Lisa, however, is unable to participate in these structures in the same way. Under constraints of ‘rationality’ and expectation, say of being a ‘caretaker’, women like Lisa have less opportunity to work, and hence have a reduced chance of accruing wealth, status, and therefore power. The interplay of schemas and resources (i.e., women as caretakers/men as breadwinners) contributes to the survival of ideological structures that oppresses women.⁸

Given this, the ideological schemas/concepts that contribute to the constitution of social structures can yield true beliefs: *the concepts of an ideology carves social reality at the joints*. This is because ideology *makes itself true*. What does this mean? According to Catherine MacKinnon, ‘...the more inequality is pervasive, the more it is simply “there.” And the more real it looks, the more it looks like truth’ (MacKinnon 1989, 101). The concepts of ideology ‘organise social life and experience in a manner that gives them an aura of truth’ (Crary 2018). This is all to say that in virtue of the role of concepts in the creation of oppressive social structure, it will turn out to be the case that beliefs formed with such concepts are epistemically justified given that there is evidence for their accuracy all around us. *Concepts are accurate because they serve, in part, to create social reality*.

For example, consider the claim that women are better caretakers of children than men. As it turns out, this is true. However, this is not true in virtue of women being better caretakers *by nature*. Instead, it is due to the fact that the concepts used to interpret the existence of women means that women are compelled to be caretakers; by

⁸ This is similar to Ian Hacking’s notion of a *looping effect*. See Hacking (2004).

Forthcoming in *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*

others and themselves. Thus, women have more experience with caretaking, and hence are more practiced. Ideology makes it true that women are better caretakers, and hence the concept *woman* accurately represents this.⁹ Given the interdependence of thought and reality, ‘thought can fail us without being false’ (Haslanger 2012b, 411).¹⁰

Simion’s epistemic constraint on conceptual engineering suggests that legitimate ameliorative projects are those that don’t result in epistemic loss. This generates a dilemma: a concept *C* of ideology is accurate, so we shouldn’t revise it; but by not revising *C*, it will continue being accurate, and it would be better if *C* was not accurate; so we should revise *C*.¹¹ Hence, this prompts the following question: What ‘should’ should we be following?

Before I get to this question, I want to state that Simion addresses some potential worries for ELP concerning the kind of mind-world interdependence that I am drawing attention to. Simion discusses the work of John Searle, who argues that ‘language is essentially *constitutive* of institutional reality. [...It is] impossible to have institutional structures such as money, marriage, governments, and property without some form of language because [...] the words or other symbols are partly constitutive of the facts’ (Searle 1995, 59 my emphasis). According to Simion, the idea that language or concepts constitute social reality presents a challenge to ELP: it appears to be *too* permissive. This is because as soon as a social kind concept is engineered, then ‘reality follows suit’ (Simion 2017, 13). Thus, the revised concept will not be epistemically deficient; it will represent how things are, since it played a role in determining the facts (Simion 2017, 13). As such, ‘any type and extent of improvement, no matter how marginal or limited, justifies an ameliorative project’ (Simion 2017, 13). Simion takes this to be a benefit of her account, not a defect. And I am inclined to agree, for the most part.

⁹ Haslanger discusses this thought at length in ‘But Mom, Crop-Tops Are Cute!’ (2012b).

¹⁰ We can now see a distinction between the functions of concepts: *representation* and *interpretation*. Both functions are relations between mind and world. Roughly, the distinction can be explicated as thus. Representation is a passive relation; it is the function of description or portrayal. And interpretation is an active relation; it is a translation of the world into meaning. Representation reflects the world as it is; and interpretation creates the world through generating social meaning.

¹¹ This is in the spirit of a puzzle offered by Haslanger (2012b).

The concern that I have with Simion's version of ELP centers around the claim that 'reality follows suit'. Given her interest in Searle, it seems that this is a claim about *constitution*. Once a social kind concept is revised, it will change facts about social reality. However, this ignores the mechanism by which language or concepts come to constitute social reality, and this story is *causal*. In the following section, I will suggest that because this story is causal, it means that the amelioration of social kind concepts will result in *temporary* epistemic loss. This presents a challenge for Simion's ELP.

4. The Epistemic Limiting Procedure+

As we have discussed, ideology partly constitutes social reality. Thus, ideological concepts accurately represent social reality. Since most of us are motivated to combat structural injustice, we will want ideological concepts to be engineered. However, it is hard to determine what's wrong with ideological concepts *epistemically speaking*. Given this, it is difficult to make sense of why we should revise ideological concepts under the constraints of ELP. After all, our aim is epistemic loss. *We want the concepts to no longer be accurate.*

It appears that, when it comes to the revision of ideological concepts, the 'should' in question is entirely moral/political. Given this, it appears that sometimes ameliorative projects are not bound by epistemic constraints. So much the worse for ELP? As Simion suggests, the proper functioning of a concept is that it is responsive to epistemic reasons. This is convincing. As such, I agree that ameliorative projects should be epistemically constrained. Nevertheless, the relevant epistemic constraint is not ELP *as it stands*. Legitimate conceptual engineering *can* involve epistemic loss. Though, only a particular *kind* of epistemic loss. I suggest that the second clause of ELP should be revised in the following way: there is not all-things-considered *epistemic* reason to refrain from amelioration. Hence:

Forthcoming in *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*

Epistemic Limiting Procedure+ (ELP+): A representational device should be ameliorated iff (1) There is all-things-considered reason to do so and (2) There is not all-things-considered epistemic reason to refrain from amelioration.¹²

To motivate this revision, let's compare the case of epistemic loss that Simion offers with those that I have in mind.

For Simion, epistemic loss concerns a loss of knowledge about the world (Simion 2017, p. 11). She provides the following example:

Take [...] the concept of 'deer'. Say that, through some weird causal chain, engineering our concept in use so as to exclude red deer would improve the life expectancy of bumblebees, which, given that bumblebees pollinate crops, would, in turn, result in economic advantages. Should we exclude the most common type of deer from the extension of 'deer' on these counts? Should we take on the epistemic loss? Intuitively, this does not seem right (ibid., p. 8).

Since revising the concept *deer* for prudential reasons would entail loss of important knowledge about deer, then such a revision is unjustified according to Simion. No moral, political, practical, etc. reason is sufficient to support ameliorative projects if it comes at the cost of epistemic loss.

Compare this to the kind of epistemic loss that we might expect when revising the concept *woman*.

Since it is an injustice that women are confined to roles that means they lack social power, the kind of amelioration of *woman* that we will be interested in is one in which the concept changes facts about social reality.¹³ Namely, a change in facts about women's oppression. If *woman* is engineered so as to exclude features about women

¹² I cash out the second clause of this definition negatively because the fact that, say, there's no epistemic loss doesn't imply that there is all-things-considered epistemic reason to ameliorate a concept. Instead, it just means that we shouldn't *refrain* from ameliorating a concept, unless there is all-things-considered epistemic reason not to ameliorate. Thanks to Richard Rowland for bringing this point to my attention.

¹³ And this is what Haslanger had in mind when she offered a revision of the concept of *woman*: draw attention to the ways that woman are oppressed, by including it in the definition of *woman*, and we will see social change (Haslanger 2000, 47).

Forthcoming in *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*

being better caretakers than men, then, while there is initial loss of knowledge, eventually, after the concept has received significant uptake, women will not be treated as better caretakers than men. Facts about social reality will change. And hence, the concept *woman* will accurately represent this.

I suggest that there is a substantive difference in the kind of epistemic loss that we can identify in each case. In the former, the concept *deer* is revised such that there is loss of knowledge *simpliciter*. The concept is no longer representationally accurate, and it will not become accurate over time (unless revised to what it was originally). This is clearly not the case when it comes to the concept *woman*. The representational inaccuracy of the concept is only *temporary*. Thus, the epistemic loss is only temporary. If the revised concept is taken up by a community of thinkers and speakers, it will cause change in their behavior, and subsequently change facts about the social world, rendering the concept representationally accurate. Put simply, with respect to *woman*, we don't lose out on knowledge in the long run; yet this is not the case for changes to the concept *deer*.¹⁴

What we can see is a difference between epistemic loss *simpliciter*, and *temporary* epistemic loss.¹⁵ And this difference concerns the *direction of influence*¹⁶ with respect to the means by which a revised concept can become representationally accurate. Epistemic loss *simpliciter* concerns the amelioration of a concept that results in a loss of knowledge, and where the accuracy of the concept depends on further revision; that is, the concept will only become accurate when influenced by the world (i.e., when people revise the concept to be accurate). Revising concepts such as these requires being sensitive to how things are (e.g., *deer*). Temporary epistemic loss concerns the amelioration of a concept that results in a loss of knowledge, but where the accuracy of the concept depends on its causal effect on social reality; that is, the concept will become accurate when it causally influences the world (i.e., when the world conforms to the revised concept). Revising concepts such as these (e.g., *woman*) doesn't require being sensitive to how things are, since such concepts are able to play a role in *determining* how things are.

¹⁴ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me on this point.

¹⁵ Thanks to Laura Schroeter for helping me get clear on this distinction.

¹⁶ This is perhaps similar to the notion of 'direction of fit', though I don't have room to discuss this.

Forthcoming in *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*

Simion's version of ELP cannot accommodate this difference. Remember, for Simion, the conditions under which a concept can be legitimately revised are strict: that 'in the process of revising a concept, *we do not end up with less knowledge about the world*' (ibid., p. 11, my emphasis). In other words, amelioration should not result in an epistemic 'deficit', as it were; there mustn't be loss in our overall understanding of how things are. Yet, Simion says nothing about whether impermissible cases of amelioration must be such that the deficits in knowledge or understanding incurred cannot be corrected by the self-reinforcing nature of the concepts that have been revised, *at least in principle*. This is to say that social kind concepts, like *woman*, are able to become accurate owing to their causal influence on the world, and this distinguishes them from natural kind concepts, such as *deer*.¹⁷ Hence, the epistemic loss in cases of the amelioration of concepts like *woman* is temporary, where 'temporary' should be understood as the causal *capacity*¹⁸ of a concept to make itself accurate; the concept *could*, in principle, accurately represent how things are without the help of revision.¹⁹ On the contrary, the epistemic loss in cases of the amelioration of concepts like *deer* is loss simpliciter, insofar as the concept does not have the same causal capacity. There is no sense in which concepts of this kind could become accurate without revision.

There is room for the distinction between epistemic loss simpliciter and temporary epistemic loss to play into our overall thinking when it comes to determining whether a concept should be ameliorated. While we might object to ameliorative projects that result in epistemic loss simpliciter, it is unclear whether the same motivation for this objection extends to those ameliorative projects that result in temporary epistemic loss. In the case of *deer*, epistemic loss runs against intuition, but in the case of *woman* the counter-intuitiveness is not as strong. And it is the distinction between kinds of epistemic loss that I believe explains this difference.

Above, I mentioned that in addition to the requirement that there be all-things-considered reason to ameliorate a concept (e.g., moral/political/practical), there should

¹⁷ For more on this distinction between social kind concepts and natural kind concepts, see Hacking (2004).

¹⁸ This notion of 'capacity' is intended to be thin; something along the lines of being disposed to become accurate under the right conditions.

¹⁹ Note that this does not say that the 'temporary' means that the self-reinforcing nature of the concept entails that it *will* become accurate.

not be all-things-considered epistemic reason to refrain from amelioration (ELP+). With this in mind, I suggest that we should refrain from amelioration when such a revision results in epistemic loss simpliciter, however, amelioration that results only in temporary epistemic loss poses no problem. Why?

Concerning the former, the epistemic loss is on-going, and owing to this the newly revised concept will continue to be epistemically worse compared to what it was originally. For instance, think of the *deer* in Simion's example. The old version of *deer* captures facts about deer that the newly revised concept is unable to account for – and this will continue to be the case until we change back to the original concept. The newly revised concept of *deer* produces an epistemic deficit in our overall knowledge of the world, and this deficit cannot be paid off by the concept since it is not self-reinforcing. It will not become accurate without the help of revision.

For the latter, the epistemic loss is temporary insofar as the concept has the causal capacity to influence the world, and, by epistemic standards, if the concept receives significant uptake, the comparative worth of the newly revised concept will come to be better, or at least just as good, than what it was prior to revision. This is because the newly revised concept can make itself accurate by self-reinforcement, and, if this is successful, the old version of the concept will be representationally inaccurate.²⁰ In other words, if the newly revised concept is widely accommodated, and has influenced social reality, there will be no epistemic deficit; there will be no overall epistemic loss; we will not end up with less knowledge about the world. After all, if a newly revised concept changes the social facts, there is nothing that the old version of the concept accounts for, epistemically speaking, that isn't captured by the newly revised concept (and more).²¹

²⁰ This is because the old version of the concept previously regulated the behavior of social agents, and hence accurately represented the old facts.

²¹ The self-reinforcing character of social kind concepts bears similarities to the mechanisms involved in *enlightened self-interest* (Tocqueville 2002; Keim 1978). Enlightened self-interest, broadly construed, concerns the actions of a self-interested agent who recognizes that short-term loss can result in long-term gain. And, importantly, 'even though self-interest is the ultimate goal, knowledge, the interests of others and the consequences, are given high consideration' (D'Souza and Adams 2014, 189). Take stealing, for example. This can be considered to create short-term prudential gain. However, if everyone within a community started stealing, this would entail long-term prudential and social loss. If, instead, everyone committed to a 'no-stealing' policy, this would mean short-term prudential loss, but would result in long-term

Forthcoming in *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*

The fact that a concept has the causal capacity to change the social world, and therefore *can* become representationally accurate, means that we don't have all-things-considered epistemic reason to refrain from amelioration. However, what is important to pay attention to is the notion of 'can'. We should expect that 'can' entails a degree of plausibility. It is unintuitive to say that *any* revision made to a concept that has the capacity for self-reinforcement means that there isn't all-things-considered epistemic reason to refrain from amelioration. We might think that if it is extremely unlikely that a concept is able to make itself representationally accurate, then we have all-things-considered epistemic reason *not* to engineer the concept. After all, the chances of paying off the epistemic deficit is slim. Hence, I believe that this prompts a new line of inquiry concerning the normative aspect of ameliorative projects: What are the *feasibility* constraints on conceptual engineering?

The question of feasibility has been a popular topic in recent political philosophy.²² Theorists interested in this question aim to provide an account of how the feasibility of political theories plays a role in our normative thinking. For example, determining whether a state should introduce universal basic income depends on whether incurring such a heavy economic cost is feasible for the state. What does 'feasibility' amount to? This is contested. However, for our purposes, we can just think of it as whether some state of affairs *can* be realized; and given the limitations of this paper, I'll leave it open as to how we should spell out 'can'. What's important to note, however, is that feasibility has normative significance. Feasibility is a constraint on claims about what we

prudential and social gain: people get to keep what they own, and not feel constantly under threat from their neighbor.

The first similarity I want to draw concerns *causality*. Here, the idea is that the way in which taking on temporary prudential loss can causally produce long-term prudential and intellectual gain, taking on epistemic loss with respect to social concepts can causally produce long-term social and epistemic gain.

The second similarity I want to draw concerns *justification*. The long-term prudential and social gains of not stealing serves as *prudential/social* justification for taking on short-term prudential loss. Likewise, we can say that the long-term epistemic and social gain serves as *epistemic/social* justification for taking on temporary epistemic loss. Thus, when each member of a community takes up the engineered concept, we can say that their actions accord with *epistemic* enlightened self-interest. I want to thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this connection.

²² For a good discussion of political feasibility, see Gilibert and Lawford-Smith (2012), Lawford-Smith (2013) and Nicholas Southwood (2018).

ought and have reason to do (Southwood 2018, 5). That is, the claim that some state of affairs should be brought about is right if bringing about such a state of affairs is feasible; and the claim that some state of affairs should be brought about is wrong if bringing about such a state of affairs is infeasible.²³

We might extend this line of thinking to the engineering of concepts with causal capacities. The claim that a concept should be engineered is right if its desired causal influence on social reality is feasible; and the claim that a concept should be engineered is wrong if its desired causal influence on social reality is infeasible. Importantly, the notion of feasibility mentioned here is epistemic: It is about the feasibility of representational accuracy. Thus, I suggest that we do not have all-things-considered epistemic reason to refrain from ameliorative projects when the representational accuracy of a concept is feasible, but we do have all-things-considered epistemic reason to refrain from ameliorative projects when the representational accuracy of a concept is infeasible. To put it differently, it is permissible to ameliorate a concept that results in epistemic loss so long as the concept *can* become representationally accurate, where ‘can’ is understood as feasible.²⁴

As it stands, I do not have an account of how to determine when a conceptual engineering project is feasible, and when it is not. However, this is an important normative question that those interested in conceptual engineering should pay attention to.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Simion’s *Epistemic Limiting Procedure* fails to make sense of important ameliorative projects that result in epistemic loss. However, Simion is right to think that in virtue of a concept’s proper functioning, conceptual engineering should be normatively constrained by epistemic reasons. Hence, I suggest that Simion’s *Epistemic Limiting Procedure* should be revised with the condition that epistemic loss is permissible in cases where the ameliorated concept has the capacity to causally

²³ Thanks to Holly Lawford-Smith for helpful insights into feasibility.

²⁴ And, it is impermissible to ameliorate a concept that results in epistemic loss so long as the concept *cannot* become representationally accurate, where ‘cannot’ is understood as infeasible.

Forthcoming in *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*

influence the world, and can therefore make itself representationally accurate. I have called this the *Epistemic Limiting Procedure+* (ELP+). From this, I suggest that we should examine the feasibility constraints on conceptual engineering.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people for their insights, comments, and discussion during the development of this paper: Stephanie Collins, Chris Cousens Madison Griffiths, Karen Jones, Holly Lawford-Smith, Richard Rowland, Laura Schroeter, Kai Tanter, William Tuckwell, and George Wood.

References

- Brownmiller, S. 1990. *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution*. New York: Dial Press.
- Burgess, T., and Plunkett, D. 2013. "Conceptual Ethics I." *Philosophy Compass*. 8 (12): 1091 – 1101.
- Burgess, T., and Plunkett, D. 2013. "Conceptual Ethics II." *Philosophy Compass*. 8 (12): 1102 – 1110.
- Cappelen, H. 2018. *Fixing Language: An Essay on Conceptual Engineering*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Clark, A., and Chalmers, D. 1998. "The Extended Mind." *Analysis* 58 (1): 7 – 19.
- Crary, A. 2018. "The Methodological is Political." *Radical Philosophy* [Online]. Available at <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/the-methodological-is-political> (Accessed: 4th July 2018).

Forthcoming in *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*

D'Souza, Jeevan F. and Adams, Kelly C. 2014. "On Unenlightened Altruism." *Journal of Human Values* 20 (2): 183 – 191.

Ekland, M. 2017. *Choosing Normative Concepts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fricker, M. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gilbert, P., and Lawford-Smith, H. 2012. "Political Feasibility: A Conceptual Exploration." *Political Studies* 60: 809 – 825.

Graham, P. J. 2012. "Epistemic Entitlement." *Noûs* 46 (3): 449 – 489.

Greenough, P. 2017. *Against Conceptual Engineering*. Book Manuscript.

Hacking, I. 2004. *Historical Ontology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Haslanger, S. 2000. "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?" *Noûs*. 34 (1): 31 – 55.

Haslanger, S. 2012a. "Ideology, Generics, and Common Ground." In *Resisting Reality*, 446 – 478, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Haslanger, S. 2012b. "But Mom, Crop-Tops are Cute! Social Knowledge, Social Structure, and Ideological Critique" in *Resisting Reality*, 406 – 428, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Haslanger, S. 2013. "Social Meaning and Philosophical Method." *American Philosophical Association 110th Eastern Division Annual Meeting*.

Haslanger, S. 2015. "Social Structure, Narrative and Explanation." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*. 45 (1): 1 – 15.

Forthcoming in *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*

Haslanger, S. 2016. "What is a (Social) Structural Explanation?" *Philosophical Studies*. 173: 113 - 130.

Howard, J. 1994. "A Social Cognitive Conception of Social Structure." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 57 (3): 210 - 227.

Joyce, R. 2001. *The Myth of Morality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Keim, G. 1978. "Corporate Social Responsibility: An Assessment of the Enlightened Self-Interest Model." *Academy of Management Review* 3 (1): 32 -39.

Lawford-Smith, H. 'Understanding Political Feasibility.' *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 21 (3): 243 - 259.

Railton, P. 1986. "Moral Realism." *The Philosophical Review*. 95: 163 - 207.

Scharp, K. 2007. "Replacing Truth." *Inquiry* 50 (6): 606 - 621.

Scharp, K. 2013. *Replacing Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Searle, J. 1995. *The Construction of Social Reality*. New York: Free Press.

Sewell, W. H. Jr. 1992. "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency and Transformation." *The American Journal of Sociology* 98 (1): 1 - 29.

Simion, M. 2017. "Knowledge First Functionalism." Manuscript.

Simion, M. 2017. "The 'Should' in Conceptual Engineering". *Inquiry*, DOI:10.1080/0020174X.2017.1392894

Forthcoming in *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*

Southwood, N. 2018. 'The Feasibility Issue.' *Philosophy Compass*. 13:e12509.
<https://doi.org.10.1111/phc3.12509>.

Thomasson, A. Forthcoming. "A Pragmatic Method for Conceptual Ethics" in *Conceptual Ethics and Conceptual Engineering*, Alexis Burgess, Hermen Cappelen, and David Plunkett (eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press

Tocqueville, A. 2002. *Democracy in America* in Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (eds.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. II.1.5.422

Zadwidski, T. 2013. *Mindshaping: A New Framework for Understanding Human Social Cognition*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.