

Conceptual Engineering

WHAT IS CONCEPTUAL ENGINEERING?

Here's a brief approximation of what Conceptual Engineering (CE) is or does:

Basically, we might want to agree that concepts are (mental) representations of the world. So, the concept of a dog would be a representation of a dog. There's different ideas on how this representation looks like exactly. Maybe it's a definition, or a prototype, or an exemplar, whatever. Important is just that whenever I think and talk about dogs, the concept of a dog will become relevant. Now, why would we want to engineer it and what does that mean?

Basically, there's two broad reasons why we'd want to engineer a given concept. Either, because it is epistemically deficient, or because it has undesirable social and societal implications. A concept is epistemically deficient if it hinders us at getting at the truth of things. If the concept of a dog is epistemically deficient (because it assumes that dogs are necessarily robots), then I'll not get things right when it comes to dogs. Hence, we will want to change that concept so it gets things right. A concept can also have undesirable societal implications. If our concept of a woman includes the idea that women are inferior to men, then that has obviously bad implications for women in our society. Again, that could be a reason why we would want to change (or engineer) that concept. How exactly one would go about engineering a concept depends on the stance one has on what concepts are (fundamentally speaking), how they are structured, and so on. That is in itself pretty interesting to explore.

So, CE is basically the practice of taking concepts that we think are deficient on some dimension and then changing them accordingly. This can help us better our epistemic positions, and it may even help us overcome some bad societal implications our current concepts have.

WHY WE SHOULD PICK IT

I'll give you three reasons why we should pick Conceptual Engineering as our topic for this year. Then, I'll give you one worry that I will subsequently diffuse.

First, the topic itself is **young** (pretty much all of the contributions are very contemporary) and **has attracted a lot of attention**. For one thing, this means that we could actually follow a debate that is going on as we read about it. If this isn't interesting in itself, then it should at least be interesting for newer members who can actually see that philosophy is still a thing (haha). For another, this means that there are contributions from both younger and more established philosophers. This should be a pro concerning our possible keynotes because there are prominent philosophers out there writing about this, but there are also younger philosophers who are just establishing themselves through writing about CE. Either way, a high-quality keynote shouldn't be too hard to find.

Second, the topic has important and really interesting **overlaps with other disciplines**. This would mean that we might be able to satisfy more than just one possible topic with this proposal. My preferred intersection would be with philosophy of mind and metaphysics. Basically, the question is about the ontological status of concepts. Other overlaps are with cognitive science, feminist philosophy, political philosophy, metaphilosophy, and philosophy of language.

Third, two of the most **prominent faculties** that specialize on Conceptual Engineering are in located in **Europe** (and hence not too far away for possible Keynotes). One is St. Andrews and the other is the University of Oslo. Hence, possible keynotes wouldn't be out of reach for us. Further, we have some experts on CE in Vienna (Max Kölbel, Delia Belleri), so we could definitely invite them for a talk.

One worry might be that **there already are too many conferences on CE** (exactly because it's such a popular sub-discipline right now). But I actually think we could take advantage of this in two ways: **First**, we could maybe **piggyback on other conferences** and see whether we can invite someone who's near Vienna

anyway. **Second**, we could make our topic a little more **specialized so as to stand out** from the other conferences and really embed ours in the official schedule for conferences next year.

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

1. Intersection CE / Philosophy of Mind / Metaphysics

- 1.1. What is the ontological status of concepts? Are they abstract or psychological entities, or even both?
- 1.2. What does the ontology of concepts entail for us engineers?
- 1.3. Are concepts prone to the type/token distinction?
 - 1.3.1. If concepts are prone to the type/token distinction, do we engineer types or tokens?
 - 1.3.2. If concepts are prone to the type/token distinction, how are they typed and how are they tokened?

2. Intersection CE / Cognitive Science / Psychology

- 2.1. What is the structure of concepts? Are they definitions, prototypes, exemplars, etc. ?
- 2.2. Is the picture of concepts in CogSci / Psychology reconcilable with the one in philosophy? Or do we talk about different entities?
- 2.3. How does the structure of concepts affect our task as engineers?
- 2.4. What is the Language of Thought and how does it relate to concepts?

3. Intersection CE / Philosophy of Language / Feminist Philosophy / Metaphilosophy

- 3.1. If a concept (like the concept of "woman") is engineered, what happens to the old concept? Can there be a plurality of (competing) concepts?
- 3.2. How can we best engineer socially laden concepts like the concepts of "race" and "gender"? How do we best find out what they currently are?

- 3.3. Is CE actually feasible? Can we engineer concepts in the real world or is it just for the philosophy room?
- 3.4. What exactly is the difference between conceptual analysis and CE?

POSSIBLE PAPERS

1. Intersection CE / Philosophy of Mind / Metaphysics

- 1.1. Margolis, Eric, and Stephen Laurence. 2007. "The Ontology of Concepts - Abstract Objects or Mental Representations?" *Noûs* 41 (4): 561-593.
- 1.2. Sutton, Jonathan. 2004. "Are Concepts Mental Representations or Abstracta?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 68 (1): 89-108.
- 1.3. Nimtz, Christian, and Julia Langkau. 2010. "Concepts in Philosophy - A Rough Geography." *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 81: 1-11.
- 1.4. Machery, Edouard. 2017. *Philosophy Within Its Proper Bounds*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 1.5. Peacocke, Christopher. 1992. *A Study of Concepts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- 1.6. Davis, Wayne A. 2003. *Meaning, Expression, and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1.7. Zalta, Edward N. 2001. "Fregean Senses, Modes of Presentation, and Concepts." *Philosophical Perspectives* 335-359.

2. Intersection CE / Cognitive Science / Psychology

- 2.1. Rosch, Eleanor, and Carolyn B Mervis. 1975. "Family Resemblances: Studies in the Internal Structure of Categories." *Cognitive Psychology* (7): 573-605.
- 2.2. Margolis, Eric, and Stephen Laurence. 1999b. "Concepts and Cognitive Science." In *Concepts: Core Readings*, edited by Eric Margolis and Stephen Laurence, 3-81. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- 2.3. Margolis, Eric, and Stephen Laurence, . 1999a. *Concepts: Core Readings*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- 2.4. Isaac, Manuel Gustavo. Forthcoming. "How to Conceptually Engineer Conceptual Engineering?" *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 1-24.
- 2.5. Murphy, Gregory. 2002. *The Big Book of Concepts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

3. Intersection CE / Philosophy of Language / Feminist Philosophy / Metaphilosophy

- 3.1. Haslanger, Sally. 2000. "Gender and race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be?" *Noûs* (34): 31-55.
- 3.2. Fischer, Eugen. 2020. "Conceptual Control: On The Feasibility of Conceptual Engineering"
- 3.3. Burgess, Alexis, and David Plunkett. 2013a. "Conceptual Ethics I." *Philosophy Compass* 8 (12): 1091-1101.
- 3.4. Burgess, Alexis, and David Plunkett. 2013b. "Conceptual Ethics II." *Philosophy Compass* 8 (12): 1102-1110.
- 3.5. Burgess, Alexis, Herman Cappelen, and David Plunkett. Forthcoming. *Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

KEYNOTES

- **Feasible and Prominent**
 - Kevin Scharp (St. Andrews)
 - Matti Eklund (Uppsala)
 - Patrick Greenough (St. Andrews)
- **Feasible but Not So Prominent**
 - Manuel Gustavo Isaac (St. Andrews)
 - Eugen Fischer (East Anglia)
 - Steffen Koch (Bochum)
- **Not So Feasible but Prominent**
 - Herman Cappelen (Formerly Oslo, but now Hong Kong apparently)
 - Edouard Machery (Pittsburgh)
 - Jesse Prinz (CUNY)
 - David Plunkett (Dartmouth)
 - Alexis Burgess (Pomona)